

Of Tenderness

“Hirosue.”

He opened his eyes a crack. Motofumi Hirosue didn’t realize he had been asleep until he was woken up by someone calling his name. He felt like he had been in the middle of a good dream, though he couldn’t remember what it was.

He was gently stroked on the head. The sensation of those indulgent fingertips was more comforting than he could describe. He could see Yosuke Matsuoka leaning in to peer at him with a very gentle look on his face.

Matsuoka’s head was small, and he had shapely eyes and a high nose. Hirosue couldn’t help but notice the perfect shape of the man’s face every time he saw him. So different from his own nondescript and unfashionable self. Hirosue usually did not care much about men’s looks, but when someone was as finely-chiseled as Matsuoka was, it was hard not to stare. It took him a while to realize that the man was also staring back at him with such intensity it almost hurt. The gaze did not move away, and Hirosue gradually began to feel suffocated.

“Hirosue.”

Still unable to figure out why his name was being called, he simply answered, “Yes?” The other man crept closer and closer. Hirosue sensed that he was about to be kissed, but he did not try to get away, nor did it ever occur to him that he needed to.

Their lips overlapped. He could feel their softness. Matsuoka was gentle with his touch, just like when he stroked Hirosue’s head. Hirosue closed his eyes dreamily in the lull that felt like a continuation of his dream. Something scratched against his chin, which brought him violently back to reality—it was a sensation he was not supposed to feel. Every touch caused a crawling down his spine that made him shudder.

Repulsion overtook him, and Hirosue instinctively shoved away the body before him. A distance formed between him and the other man. Matsuoka’s gentle face turned tense, and he looked at Hirosue like he was about to cry. The thoughts behind Hirosue’s actions were simple: it was unpleasant, so he had simply pushed it away. He did not immediately realize the meaning of what he had done.

Matsuoka’s gaze, which had been almost painfully fixed on him until now, dropped away.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a small voice.

Hirosue didn’t know how to respond, since he didn’t know what the apology was for.

“I think I’m kind of drunk. I’ll go home now.” Matsuoka grabbed his coat and bag, and briskly made his way to the doorway. Hirosue rushed to stand up, but felt the ground lurch under his feet. He leaned against the wall and called to the man from where he was.

“The last train is already gone.”

Matsuoka turned around. “If I get out to the main road, I’ll be able to hail a cab,” he said, draping his coat over his shoulders as he smiled at him. The tension still remained in his cheeks, which pained Hirosue somewhat.

“You should stay over.”

"Not today, thanks. Good night." With that, Matsuoka left for home. Once left alone, Hirosue felt closed in by loneliness and guilt. Today was Christmas Eve, his birthday, and in celebration, Matsuoka had treated him to an expensive-looking Japanese full-course meal. After leaving the restaurant, they agreed they still felt like drinking a little more, and had gone in search of another restaurant or bar. Unfortunately, every shop they went to was full. They couldn't bother to wait for seats, and it was much too cold outside. In the end, Hirosue and Matsuoka decided to kick back with drinks at home, and had come back to Hirosue's apartment.

They drank over casual conversation, chatting about the meal that they had just enjoyed or the drunken office worker they had seen on the way back. It was a good time over drinks—or, it was supposed to have been.

He had pushed Matsuoka away, but it wasn't because he didn't want to kiss him. Besides, he had slept with Matsuoka once a long time ago, though he had been too drunk to remember any of it. Because of that previous experience, he had never expected to feel so repulsed at feeling Matsuoka's sparse stubble rub against his own chin.

All this time, Hirosue had been unable to stop thinking about the man who had deceived him in women's clothes but claimed to love him in earnest. His mind was so full of Matsuoka that he had ended his relationship with his girlfriend. Now, he was seeing Matsuoka under the condition that he would "probably fall in love with him".

He was more than aware that Matsuoka was a man; yet, his own attitude moments ago was not the way someone acted towards the person he loved.

Hirosue had already been getting a sneaking suspicion. It was one month now since he started meeting up often with Matsuoka. It was fun being with him. Hirosue was bad at conversation, but he could talk smoothly when he was with Matsuoka. When they were together, the space they shared became a comfortable one. But there was no driving impulse there. He didn't feel the same feverish rush of emotions that kept him awake at night when he was crazy about Yoko Eto.

Matsuoka was waiting for him to arrive at an answer. The man never pressed him; he just stood by, patiently watching for Hirosue's next move. Today, in a rare exception, he had slightly overstepped his boundaries. But Hirosue had rejected the man in the cruelest way possible, and had let him go home without even trying to patch things up.

Hirosue pulled out his cell phone. He wanted to send an e-mail, but he didn't know what to write. There was no way he could say he had pushed Matsuoka away because he had been repulsed by his facial hair. *I was just surprised because it was so sudden*—something like that? He felt like any message he wrote would make Matsuoka apologize. He sank deep into his thoughts and eventually fell back asleep. When he woke up, it was morning.

He had received an e-mail from Matsuoka during the night.

'Sorry. I went a bit too far back there. I was a bit drunk,' it said, in a swift apology. Hirosue felt it would be strange to respond to an apology with another apology, so he only wrote, *'Please don't worry about it. I'm sorry as well.'*

That was the night of Christmas Eve, his birthday.

The trees lining the streets were completely stripped of their leaves, their spindly burnt-brown branches swaying in the wind. As they walked down the sidewalk to the subway station, Matsuoka flipped his coat collar up and hunched his shoulders.

"I told you, it's fine," he said. "You must have said 'I'm sorry,' and 'Forgive me' like, ten times already. I don't mind waiting, so you don't have to worry about it."

Matsuoka's breath was white when he exhaled. They were past the chaotically busy days of the year-end and new year, and were now into February, the year's coldest season. It had snowed yesterday and day before, though not enough to accumulate. Even with gloves on, one's fingers were still prone to freezing.

They had promised to meet at seven. Usually, that hour gave Hirosue more than enough time to get there, but today of all days, he was told to work overtime. Judging by the amount, he guessed an hour of overtime would be enough to finish it. He e-mailed Matsuoka, whom he had dinner plans with, and asked him if he minded pushing back their dinner a little. 'That's better for me, too,' Matsuoka had replied, and they settled on meeting an hour later than the original time. Things were still alright at that point.

Another clerk had been told to stay behind as well as Hirosue. They split up the work, and Hirosue finished his portion in about an hour. He felt reluctant to just pack up and go home because his portion was done, so he stayed behind to help the other clerk. Somewhere along the way, he noticed something wrong with the numbers coming up on the spreadsheet.

A recalculation made it clear that the clerk had made a simple calculation error. They would have faced serious consequences if they had submitted this without catching the mistake.

"I'm glad we caught it early," said the clerk as he began to make the corrections. Suddenly, the computer froze. Hirosue's mind went blank along with the screen.

When they restarted the computer, the portion of the data that they had not backed up was completely gone. Faced with no other choice, they began recreating the unsaved portion. Time ticked on, and by the time they finally finished, it was past nine.

Hirosue's workplace at Koishikawa Laboratory was in the outskirts of town, and transportation was frustratingly lacking. The bus was their main mode of transportation, since there were no trains running nearby. But even the bus stopped running as early as seven in the evening. Hirosue knew a taxi was going to be inevitable the moment he was told to work overtime. Luckily today, his co-worker offered to drive him to the station, perhaps out of guilt.

When Hirosue finally got to see Matsuoka, it was almost ten. The *izakaya* they usually went to closed at eleven-thirty, and he didn't know many other restaurants nearby. He had been at a complete loss when Matsuoka peered into his face and said, "I feel like eating ramen, don't you?" There was a good *ramen* stall nearby, according to him, so Hirosue followed Matsuoka. He was alright with anything, and if Matsuoka wanted to go, he had no complaints about it.

The warmth of the *ramen* spread pleasantly throughout his frozen body. It was Hirosue's first time eating at a food stall, but its unpretentious and informal atmosphere reminded him of his favourite *izakaya*, which was comforting. *Ramen* wasn't enough to fill them up, so they drank beer while eating a few pieces of *oden*.¹ Matsuoka seemed to like the boiled eggs, and he ended up finishing

1 A winter dish of root vegetables, boiled whole egg, fish cakes, etc. simmered in a clear broth. The customer

all the boiled eggs that the stall had prepared for the day. When the stall owner told him they had run out, Matsuoka looked dismayed. "Already? That's too bad," he said, even after he had eaten so many. Hirosue discreetly smiled to himself.

So many things had happened today, with his overtime and its problems, but *ramen*, *oden*, and beer were enough to make them feel distant. With his chin in hand, Hirosue gazed at Matsuoka joking with the stall owner. Matsuoka's smile made him smile, too.

They left the stall in high spirits. The station was close by, but since they were warmed up, they chatted while they walked to the next station over. Soon, Hirosue started to feel cold in the whipping wind. He felt guilty about making Matsuoka wait for close to two hours in this weather, and had apologized.

"Did I really say 'sorry' ten times? Were you counting?"

Matsuoka turned around at Hirosue's question. His eyes narrowed as he grinned.

"I lied."

"You can't just throw around numbers like that."

"That's how much you were apologizing, though."

Beside him, Matsuoka suddenly started humming something. It was a song about winter. As Hirosue wondered who used to sing it, the song eventually stopped. Matsuoka looked up at the sky.

"I wonder if it'll snow today. The weather forecast made it sound like it was going to."

Matsuoka brought his hands out of his pockets and blew on his fingertips.

"Aren't you going to wear gloves?"

"I left them at work."

Hirosue couldn't help but notice how red his fingertips were. He took off his own gloves and offered them to the man.

"Here." He had gotten them as a present from Matsuoka. They were warm and comfortable to wear, and had become his favourite pair. Matsuoka glanced at the gloves, but did not move to accept them.

"It's fine. If I borrow them, you'll be cold."

"But it bothers me."

They stood in their tracks, staring at each other's hands. Neither would back down.

"Half and half, then," Matsuoka said, taking one glove from him.

"Are you sure half is enough?"

Matsuoka laughed briefly, though Hirosue had no idea why, and wore one glove and stuck the other hand in his coat pocket. He broke into a brisk walk.

They spotted a middle-aged man in a suit lying on the ground in front of the crosswalk near the station. He looked past fifty, and the hair on his head was getting pitifully thin. A policeman was crouched next to him, asking questions like, "What's your name?" and "Where do you live?".

"Stop botherin' me, goddamnit," the man slurred, still lying on the ground. Their discussion was going nowhere. The man's face was beet-red, and one could catch a strong whiff of alcohol just by walking past him. He clearly had had too much to drink. Perhaps he was lucky that the officer had found him; he would have put himself in danger by sleeping outside in this cold.

can pick and choose which ingredients they want in their serving. Served in bowls as well as on skewers.

Matsuoka glanced backwards after they passed the middle-aged man.

"I wonder if he had a rough day, or something."

"Looked like it, huh," Hirosue agreed. Matsuoka let out a thin sigh.

"Speaking of which, you know how our company hasn't been doing well lately? They're going to be doing some drastic cost-cutting, and I hear a few people are going to be laid off at the end of the fiscal year. Seems like they're targeting people over fifty, though, so we probably have nothing to do with it."

"I haven't heard anything like that where I am."

"Maybe things are different in the research field. Oh, on an unrelated note, Hayama is quitting in March."

When Hirosue turned around in surprise, Matsuoka looked him straight in the eye.

"Why?" Hirosue couldn't help but ask.

"Because she's getting married."

Hirosue stopped in his tracks.

"Apparently she had a marriage interview last November," Matsuoka explained, "and since then, everything's been decided like clockwork. I guess arranged marriages move forward pretty fast, huh? The wedding's in July, but she says she'll quit in March and take her time to train herself in her housewifely duties."

Hirosue and Hayama had been dating until last October. Hayama's confession was what started it. Back then, Hirosue had still been having trouble forgetting about Yoko Eto. Perhaps if he spent time with someone new, with someone who said she loved him, he would be able to forget about her—that was what he had thought.

In the end, he had ended up breaking up with her. Now, it was none of his business if Hayama got herself a new boyfriend or got married afterwards. But he still could not hide his surprise and bewilderment at hearing this news barely months after their breakup.

"—I suppose women are better at moving on, huh," Hirosue said, partly to himself and partly as a question.

"Who knows," Matsuoka dismissed coolly, and began to walk again. Hirosue followed after him, still in thought about the woman who had claimed to love him four months ago. Wasn't it a tad flighty of her to tell him she loved him, then marry another man barely six months later? Hirosue tilted his head, wondering if she'd always been that kind of woman, and a sudden realization dawned on him.

People's feelings change. Take himself, for instance—his feelings had swayed towards Matsuoka even while he was dating Hayama. He had been lulled into a feeling of superiority, assuming that those feelings of love, those special feelings directed solely at him, would remain forever. He was embarrassed at his own insolence.

"Ms. Hayama was good at cooking and really mindful around the household, so I think she'd make a good wife," Hirosue said as he caught up to Matsuoka.

"Was Hayama really that good at cooking?"

"I think she was, at least. She used to make me curry and gratin often."

There was a slight pause. "If it's just curry we're talking about, I'm pretty good at that, too,"

Matsuoka mumbled. "I used to cook for myself a lot when I first started working full-time. Curry with lots of seafood, or curry with a focus on mushrooms. With cheese."

"You put cheese in curry?"

"It's actually pretty good," Matsuoka said. "I made it for a couple people and they all liked it."

"Uh-huh." Cheese curry with mushrooms. It sounded quite rich.

"Want me to make it next time you come over?"

"Oh, sure! I'd love to try it," Hirosue said, perhaps a little too enthusiastically. Matsuoka chuckled. Hirosue ducked his head, embarrassed for acting like a child.

"You're funny, you know that, Hirosue?" Matsuoka hummed another tune, then quickly quit. They arrived at the station. Matsuoka returned Hirosue's right glove. "See you," he said, before walking towards the platform on the right. Hirosue was on the opposite platform to the left. Hirosue's train came first. When he glanced over at the platform across, Matsuoka was waving.

Matsuoka's figure disappeared quickly once the train rounded the bend. Hirosue sat down in an unoccupied seat and let out a short sigh.

He enjoyed going out to eat when it was with Yosuke Matsuoka. Back in school, it had been a whole different matter. But in his life as a working adult, he had never met a man he got along so well with. He and Matsuoka ate dinner together once or twice a week, and spent weekends together every other week or so. They would go for a casual drive or go to watch a movie, or sometimes spend the day vegging out in front of the TV watching DVDs at one another's apartments. Hirosue was very fond of these peaceful, comfortable times they spent together.

Last Christmas, on his birthday, he had eaten dinner with Matsuoka and received a present from him. He had refused out of modesty, but Matsuoka brushed it off, saying it wasn't that expensive. Hirosue had opened the box to find a beautiful watch with a blue face. It looked simple and comfortable to wear. Despite saying that he couldn't accept such a gift, Hirosue found himself instantly in love with the watch.

"You know, since I heard before that you lost your watch," Matsuoka had said in a small voice. The food was delicious, he had taken a great liking to his present, and their conversation had been vibrant; Hirosue had enjoyed his birthday very much. Perhaps that was why he wanted to spend a little more time with Matsuoka even after they had left the restaurant and it was time to go home. But since Christmas had overlapped with the weekend, all the restaurants and bars nearby were full.

"Want to have drinks at my place?" Hirosue had been the one to suggest it. On the way home, they bought cans of beer and *chuhai* at the convenience store and resumed drinking at his apartment. He couldn't remember what they talked about, but it was funny and he remembered laughing often. He also recalled asking Matsuoka for his birthday so he could do something in return, and Matsuoka had not told him.

"Don't worry about me," he had said and shrugged it off.

They talked until it was almost time for the last train to leave. Matsuoka had been looking at his watch, wondering what to do. Hirosue had suggested that he sleep over. Afterwards, when Matsuoka kissed him, he had impulsively shoved him away.

That incident had been put behind them after they both apologized over e-mail, at least in Hirosue's opinion. But he did notice one small change. He began to get visibly less e-mails every day

from Matsuoka compared to before. He wondered if it was because of that incident, but Matsuoka's e-mails had not stopped altogether. Besides, they were both busy as the year drew to a close—that was probably why, he convinced himself.

Hirosue went back to the countryside for the new year as he did every year, and did not return to the city until January 3. He met up with Matsuoka on the same day. They had not seen each other since Christmas, so it had been about ten days.

They agreed to meet in the afternoon at a park near the Shinto shrine instead of in front of the station, where it would probably be crowded. When Hiro sue arrived at the park ten minutes before their agreed time, Matsuoka was already waiting.

He still couldn't forget the look on Matsuoka's face. His mouth was curved up in a smile, but his eyes looked as if they had seen something frightening.

"Uh, long time no see." Even his voice seemed to tremble a little.

"Yeah, um. Did you wait long?"

"Not at all. I just got here."

"It's cold outside. Want to drink something warm before heading over?" Hiro sue suggested, and invited Matsuoka to go to a coffee shop nearby. Inside the coffee shop, they could spot the occasional girl in *kimono*.²

"What did you do for new years, Matsuoka?"

Matsuoka, who had been sitting with his hands wrapped around his cup of coffee instead of drinking it, jerked and raised his face.

"Oh, um... just lazed at home..."

"Same with me. I thought you'd be the type to be out there playing sports, or something."

"I've never invited you out to anything like that before, though, have I?"

"I thought maybe you were being considerate because I'm bad at sports."

Matsuoka smiled briefly. "I've always liked being at home. I do enough running around outside for work, so..."

That made sense. Hiro sue heard that people in sales were always madly busy, and often their health suffered because of it. His former boss, Fukuda, always said sales was an easy job, but Hiro sue had always had the feeling that it wasn't. Matsuoka said his shoes didn't even last one year. In General Affairs, that was unthinkable.

"I like hot spring resorts. Just relaxing in the water, putting your feet up and being waited on hand and foot. That kind of stuff."

"I like hot springs, too."

Then *why don't we*—Matsuoka began, then cut himself off awkwardly. Hiro sue wondered what could be wrong, but continued to talk.

"Back in university, I used to go the public bath nearby all the time. My apartment came with a shower, but sometimes I just had the urge to soak in a huge bath."

"Hot springs and public baths are kind of different, no?"

Hiro sue didn't notice until it was pointed out. "I guess so," he said. "Big baths all seem the same to me."

2 It is common for women to wear *kimono* for *hatsumode*, or the first visit to the Shinto shrine in the new year.

"Not one for details, are you," laughed Matsuoka. The tension finally fell away from his cheeks. They left the coffee shop a little later to visit the shrine on their *hatsumode*. By the time they headed home, Matsuoka was his energetic self again.

From that day forward, the trickle of e-mails slowly increased to their usual pace, and Matsuoka began inviting him to dinner and outings at the same frequency as before. Although Matsuoka never said so himself, he seemed to have taken the incident with the kiss at Christmas quite to heart.

The train gave a big lurch as it pulled into the station close to his apartment. The moment Hirosue stepped onto the platform, the freezing air swooped down on him from all sides. Hirosue buried his nose in his scarf, hunched his shoulders, and walked swiftly. He did not pass many people on the street, perhaps because of the late hour.

He walked past the detached house near his apartment, whose yard was overgrown with bushes. A dog suddenly barked at him, making him flinch. He still couldn't get used to it, though it happened every day, and he couldn't help but chuckle. Every day was the same, an almost wearying repetition. But Hirosue liked this feeling. He wasn't looking for anything more. It was the same with his relationship with Matsuoka: things didn't have to go anywhere. He was perfectly satisfied with the way things were.

Hirosue seldom talked back to people because he didn't like getting into arguments. That inevitably led to people who would mistakenly think they could say anything to him and get away with it. Those people would say things to him in an increasingly direct manner, whereas with other people, they would probably choose their words more carefully. And more often than not, Hirosue was hurt by these words. Once Hirosue was left with an impression of these people, it was hard to erase. At work, he always ended up as a target for people to release their frustrations on, and he knew the root of the problem lay in the fact that he always made the wrong choices about when to speak out and when to keep silent. He was the root of the problem—he knew that—but there was nothing he could do. Of those who didn't bother to be polite to him, many of them were males. Women were a little more considerate.

Matsuoka also spoke in an upfront manner, but Hirosue could always understand his reasoning, and he had never found it unpleasant. He could tell the man was always looking out for him. Matsuoka was a kind man.

If Matsuoka were to tell him he was in trouble, Hirosue knew he would want to help. He would want to do everything in his power. Although he did cherish Matsuoka, the truth was that he did not feel the impulse to engage in physical acts like with Yoko Eto.

He had ended the relationship with his girlfriend to chase after a fleeing Matsuoka. He had told the man he might love him, then put off giving an answer, and ultimately arrived at this conclusion. Hirosue could not bring himself to say that he wanted to stay as friends. He could tell Matsuoka loved him just by watching him. He was always the nice friend around Hirosue, but in the occasional brief instance, he would feel a heat like smouldering embers in the way Matsuoka looked at him.

Was there any way Matsuoka's feelings would subside? Couldn't his romantic feelings fizzle by themselves so they could continue seeing each other as friends? Was there any way they could arrive

at the kind of relationship where they would each get married, but still invite each other out and meet up for the occasional drink?

Hirosue heaved a sigh at the dark sky. His white breath vanished in wisps, and the night air was slightly painful in his lungs as he breathed it in.

That day, Hirosue was called to the head clerk's desk right before the end of the work day. The head clerk looked more displeased than Hirosue had ever seen him, and he sensed instantly that it was bad news. He cast around his thoughts for what it could be, and he remembered the documents he had worked overtime the other day to finish. He had done a final check, but perhaps he had overlooked something in his rush. He may have made typos, but he knew he had confirmed the numbers over and over.

"Could you come with me for a minute?" The head clerk took him to the small meeting room next door. Hirosue tilted his head in perplexity; the head clerk wasn't the type to bother taking people aside when they were in trouble. The head clerk entered the meeting room ahead of him, and told Hirosue to close the door. Apparently it was something he didn't want others to hear.

"It's been a year since you came to Koishikawa, isn't it?"

"Yes."

A short silence. Although they were standing face-to-face, the head clerk refused to meet Hirosue's eyes. He was turning fifty this year. Hirosue had heard that this man had made a fatal mistake in the midst of a big project at headquarters and had been seconded to Koishikawa as a result. One of the senior clerks had told him.

"Last year, when you were transferred here," the head clerk admitted, "I thought we were getting someone useless again. And it's true, a lot of the time, headquarters sends us people who don't take their work seriously, or have problems with their characters. But you're—well, you're not the fastest at your work, but you don't make mistakes, and you take your work seriously. I was really happy that they sent someone good for once."

"Th-thank you."

The praise made him think that it wasn't such bad news after all, and took the nervous tension out of his shoulders.

"Before you came, we got evaluation slips from your boss at headquarters and from HR. It was pretty atrocious, to tell you the truth. That was another reason why I was on guard. But contrary to what it said on your slip, you turned out to be a hard working, responsible man. I didn't know what would have earned you such a bad evaluation. Did you have some personal disagreements with your boss over there?"

Fukuda's face crossed his mind. "Oh, uh, not in particular," Hirosue answered.

"I see," said the head clerk, pressing his thumb to his chin. "You're a slow worker, but you get your work done properly. And you don't really seem like the type that would attract grudges. I submitted an evaluation for you, as well, and I stand by its credibility."

Hirosue had no idea what this discussion was leading up to. The head clerk heaved a sigh.

"There's been an unofficial announcement from HR."

His heart stirred. It was clear that his evaluation had improved. Perhaps, then, he would be transferred back to General Affairs at headquarters.

"As of the end of March, we'll be letting you go."

"—What—?"

Hirosue's mind went blank. His mouth trembled, and the words would not come out. Letting him go—did that mean he was getting laid off? The head clerk wore a difficult expression as he drew his eyebrows together.

"I heard rumours that headquarters was handing out dismissals to workers over fifty, but you're still young and in your thirties. I don't know what the higher-ups are thinking." He sighed with folded arms. "I'm sorry. But that's how it is."

Hirosue balled his hands into hard fists. He felt an uncomfortable sweat breaking out in his armpits.

"I... but... you can't just tell me to quit on such short notice..."

The head clerk looked at him with pity. "I understand it's not the easiest thing to swallow. But this is what the company has decided. If you have objections, you can go directly to the higher-ups, but I doubt anything will change. You'll just end up having an unpleasant experience. But, mind you, I personally think this decision is cruel. I'll negotiate to see if they can at least give you good severance pay."

It was not a joke. He was really being laid off. The truth crept up threateningly from his feet.

"But, well, compared to people in their fifties, you're still young and you're single. You've got plenty of chances to start over. I thought I'd let you know about this early, since you've probably got to think about finding other employment and such. The official announcement will be on March 25. Be sure not to tell anyone until then."

As Hirosue stood dumbfounded, the head clerk gave him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

"Just because you have to quit, it doesn't mean your life is over. Don't let it get to you too much."

The head clerk left the meeting room, leaving Hirosue alone. He collapsed into a nearby chair. Both Matsuoka and the head clerk had said that only people over fifty were being laid off. Why had he been part of that group?

Hirosue knew that his transfer to Koishikawa Laboratory was, in effect, a relegation, since he wasn't even a researcher. But he had believed that he would some day be transferred back to headquarters if he continued to do his best. But far from being transferred back, he was being laid off. He was being branded as an Unwanted Worker.

Hirosue knew he wasn't amazing at his work. He was slow and clumsy. But still, in his own way, he believed he had worked hard and done the best he could. Was that still not enough? Did that mean he was incompetent? He probably was, if he wasn't wanted anymore. His thirteen years of employment at this company had all come to naught.

There was also the news that his evaluation had been terrible at headquarters. It was true that he and his boss, Fukuda, had not gotten along. But Hirosue had worked for several bosses in the past who thrust the blame onto lower workers or made unreasonable demands. Fukuda was nothing special.

However, he did sense that Fukuda harboured a needless animosity towards him. Had Fukuda lowered Hirosue's evaluation grades based on personal feelings? Would someone who stood above others do such a thing purely for personal reasons? *Maybe—maybe—*Just thinking about it made Hirosue's chest feel tight and his thoughts turn black. He didn't want to hate anyone for something that might not even be true. He wanted to believe it wasn't.

So, why was he being laid off? It was because he wasn't good enough. Because he couldn't do his work. Because he was incompetent. Not needed by his company. Hirosue felt dashed to the ground by his own thoughts, and his spirits sank so low they seemed to know no bottom. It was a while before Hirosue could get out of his chair.

He didn't remember much of what happened until he arrived at home. He returned once to the office, then sat down in front of the computer like the rest of his colleagues working overtime, but he didn't remember thinking or moving his hands.

When he came to, he was sitting absently on the *tatami* floor of his apartment, still wearing his coat. The heat was turned off in his room, and it was freezing cold. He was hungry, but he didn't have the energy to go out to buy something.

I'm going to get laid off.

Hirosue cradled his head, at a loss of how to cope with this harsh reality. He couldn't bear to tell his parents that he was being made to quit his job. It would be too humiliating to say he had been laid off because he was incompetent. His family wasn't wealthy, but when he told them he wanted to go to a university in Tokyo, they had let him go without a single complaint. Afterwards, when he managed to get a job at a decently well-known company, they had been happy for him. They forgave him for only being able to visit during the Obon holiday and the new year. "Things must be busy at big company like yours," they'd say. And after coming this far, this is what it had come to. Hirosue didn't want his parents to think that he was a failure.

When April rolled around and he was kicked out of his company, he wouldn't be able to go back home. He didn't want to. This meant he would have to search for a new job in the city. He hadn't gone job-searching since university, so he had no idea where to start. Employment magazines? Hello Work?³ His uncertainty did nothing but aggravate his anxiety.

An e-mail ringtone resounded in his cold room. Hirosue lazily dragged his cell phone out of his bag. It was from Matsuoka.

'You done work? I'm just about to go home now. Are you good with 7pm tomorrow at the usual spot?'

He remembered now that he had made plans to have dinner tomorrow with Matsuoka. Matsuoka always e-mailed him with a confirmation the day before their plans, in case they had to change plans due to work.

Hirosue had gotten the same kind of e-mail many times in the past. It was his current predicament, perhaps, that made Matsuoka's words seem overly giddy in his eyes. —It irritated him to no end.

Matsuoka had no idea about Hirosue's situation. It wasn't Matsuoka's fault—he knew that, but he couldn't bring himself to reply. He turned off his cell phone. Right now, he didn't feel like interacting with anyone at all.

3 An employment agency.

Twice, Hirosue turned down invitations from Matsuoka by lying and saying he'd caught a cold. They'd been talking about watching a movie over the weekend, but he pushed that back to the following week as well, using the cold as an excuse.

It wasn't as if he had anything special to do instead; after turning down Matsuoka's invitations, he merely sat absently at home or watched TV.

On the day he received the news of his layoff, Hirosue had been too devastated to eat anything. The following day at work, he couldn't concentrate and kept making careless mistakes, but the head clerk did not reprimand him.

"Well, be careful next time," the head clerk only said, even though Hirosue's mistake would usually have warranted a summons to his desk and a public yelling. Hirosue wondered if the head clerk was only pitying him because he was getting laid off, and it made him feel even more wretched.

Once he gave it a week or so to let the news sink in, Hirosue gradually found himself coming to terms with his feelings. While he acknowledged that he was incapable, he began to realize that he also had to do something about it. Once he lost his job, as an obvious consequence, his income would plummet to zero. No doubt the head clerk had let him know of HR's decision early so that he could start looking for his next job soon. Hirosue tried to think positively as he began the search for his next job.

On Saturday afternoon, Hirosue sat before his CV and an employment listings magazine, folded his arms, and thought hard. He was bad at thinking on his feet, and not skilled at conversation, so he probably wasn't suitable for a sales job. He preferred an administrative job, and something that didn't involve interacting with others. He found a few places that matched his criteria, but the salary was considerably less than what he was getting now. That couldn't be helped, so he resigned himself to it and started writing out⁴ his CV when he realized something. For the entire decade and some of his working life, he had worked solely in administration. He had no other qualifications to speak of. He had nothing by which to promote himself.

Should he return to school? Or take correspondence courses? He couldn't hope to do any of it on time when he had to start looking for a job immediately. First things first, he decided to finish writing his CV. He looked at the example while he let his pen glide along the page, then made a mistake. He used a correction pen, but it didn't look quite right. He felt like the person reading the CV would have a bad impression. Hirosue crumpled up the unfinished CV into a ball, tossed it into the trash can, and rolled over onto the *tatami* floor. *Maybe I should just go back home to the country*, he thought. He was a little weary of the city and its harsh work environment and demanding personal relationships.

Hirosue's hometown was a fishing village in the Kansai region. His father had started up a factory for processed fish products, which Hirosue's older brother and wife had succeeded. They now ran the business along with Hirosue's parents, who were still working. Their profits were not large, but they generated enough income to comfortably provide for the family.

4 Unlike CVs in North America, which are almost always typed, it is still common in Japan to buy or print a template and handwrite the contents.

Since the factory didn't need any more hands, Hirosue would only burden his family with another mouth to feed if he went back. He also knew well enough that the countryside yielded a severely limited choice of jobs compared to the city.

As Hirosue lay there, he started to get hungry. He hadn't bothered to eat anything since morning. Hirosue threw on a down jacket over his sweatshirt and sweatpants and left his apartment. He went to the bookstore and was walking around with a new employment magazine in hand when he spotted a book he had been intending to read a few years ago. It was now out on paperback and piled with the front covers showing. He took that as well and headed to the cash register.

He thought about going for a walk to refresh his mind, but when he saw a dusting of snow starting to come down, he decided not to. He had been noticing the signs of coming snow; the sky was grey and the air had been cold for quite a while.

After buying new CV templates and a *bento* at the convenience store, Hirosue made his way straight home. Just when he was around the corner from his apartment, his cell phone rang in his pocket. It wasn't an e-mail notification—it was a call. From Matsuoka.

"Yes, Hirosue speaking."

"Oh, hey, this is Matsuoka. Where are you right now?"

Hirosue looked around. "Near my apartment. Why?"

"I had an errand to run in this area, and I thought I'd drop by your place, but you weren't home. You said you were sick, so I was wondering what happened to you."

"I went to the convenience store."

"Oh, okay," Matsuoka murmured, sounding caught off-guard. "You gonna be home soon?"

"Yeah."

"Can I stop by your place for a bit? I'm still in front of your door."

Hirosue didn't have the heart to send back a man who had come all the way here. But to be honest, he did not want to see Matsuoka just yet. He didn't think he'd be able to truly enjoy Matsuoka's company. If the man worked at a different company, Hirosue would perhaps be more inclined to vent and get Matsuoka to sympathize. But since they worked at the same company, Matsuoka also knew how their system worked. If he told Matsuoka he was getting laid off, Matsuoka would instantly know that it was because he was incompetent.

Hirosue wasn't going to flatter himself and think that Matsuoka had a high opinion of his job performance, but he even so, he didn't want the man to think he was so useless that he was already getting laid off at this age. He knew Matsuoka would find out anyway through the HR bulletin on March 25, but he could not help it.

"I'm still kind of sick. I don't want you to catch my cold," Hirosue answered.

"Oh, I won't stay long. I just have some things to give you."

It looked like he would have to see Matsuoka after all. Hirosue ambled into a walk again with leaden feet. He didn't want to see Matsuoka, but he had to. He already felt guilty about cancelling their plans with a lie, and he hadn't been able to refuse.

He could see his apartment now. A figure shifted in front of his apartment door. It was Matsuoka. When the man spotted him, he waved enthusiastically. Barred from ignoring him now, Hirosue reluctantly gave a small wave back.

"Long time no see—well, in a week and a bit, I guess." Matsuoka hunched his shoulders. He was wearing jeans and a khaki-coloured coat. He looked good in glasses, and his rugged ring wasn't pretentious at all. Even in Hirosue's view as a fellow man, Matsuoka was good-looking enough to make one jealous. Matsuoka was the total opposite of him, with his careless outfit consisting of sweats and a down jacket. Looking at Matsuoka made him feel like they were different somewhere on a foundational level.

"I'm sorry for... cancelling our plans so many times."

"You were sick, weren't you? Don't worry about it." 'Kay? The man grinned at him, causing an uncomfortable prick in Hirosue's conscience.

"So, what did you go out to buy?" Matsuoka asked, leaning into peer at what he was holding. Hirosue unwittingly hid the bag of books behind him, though he knew the employment magazine wasn't visible through the paper bag separating it from the rest of his things.

"A *bento* and some books. —I was a little bored," he added in an excuse.

"I brought you some stuff, too, but it's all food. Maybe I should have brought books and DVDs instead."

A plastic bag was offered to him.

"Oh, no," Hirosue stammered, "you didn't have to go out of your way to..."

"It's not much to feel bad about, really, so take it," Matsuoka insisted. "It's too heavy to carry back home, anyway."

Hirosue could see the red of apples and the orange of tangerines in the plastic bag that had been thrust towards him. Even though he had lied to Matsuoka, the man had come out of concern to see how he was doing. The guilt was enough to make him want to crawl into a hole.

"I don't want to keep you, so I'll be on my way," Matsuoka said. "I'll e-mail you later. Let's go for drinks once your cold gets better."

Without even a single selfish request, the man turned his back and made to go home. Hirosue found himself blurting out before he knew it.

"Um—"

Matsuoka turned around just before the stairs.

"Um... my cold is actually getting better."

Matsuoka tilted his head curiously. "Good for you," he said.

"Since you've come all this way, why don't you stop by for some tea? Just excuse my mess."

Matsuoka's face visibly lit up. "Really?"

"Um. Yeah."

Matsuoka hurried back to his side. Hirosue unlocked the door and ushered Matsuoka in before him. As the man's body slipped past his, he could catch a whiff of cigarettes.

"Matsuoka, are you a smoker?"

"Oh, would you rather I didn't smoke?"

"I didn't mean it like that. I've just never seen you smoke, that's all."

"I do it once in a while. Today, I had nothing to do while I was waiting for you, so... oh, but I didn't drop ashes on your doorstep or anything. I carry around a portable ashtray."

Hirosue smiled. "I wasn't worried about that."

"Oh. You must have quite a bit of faith in me, then?"

"Well, I just know you're not the type to do that."

"You're giving me too much credit," Matsuoka said wryly, though looking happy all the same as he stepped inside the apartment. He went down the narrow hallway into the far room and perched on the floor in front of the *kotatsu*. That sight of him was the same as when he used to crossdress. Hirosue offered a cup of coffee to the man who had thoroughly frozen himself outside.

"Thanks," Matsuoka said, wrapping both hands around the cup and bringing it to his lips.

"Say, it's been a while since I came to your place, Hirosue." Matsuoka blew on his coffee to cool it as he spoke.

"Really? Last time—" The last time had been Christmas, when Matsuoka had kissed him and Hirosue had shoved him away. The moment he realized it, Hirosue closed his mouth. They never touched this topic, as if they were under an unspoken oath. Matsuoka was the one to break the unnatural silence.

"You know, when I heard you had a cold, I was imagining you moaning and groaning in bed. But if you were well enough to be at work yesterday, it's probably not that bad, right?"

"Oh. Yeah. It was getting better, but I just took the day off today to be safe."

The remorse of lying made his throat dry as he spoke. He hated people who lied without hesitation, but here he was lying, too, when things were inconvenient for him. Seeing Matsuoka believe him without a smidgeon of doubt made him feel even more uncomfortable.

"I know what you mean. Long colds can be physically taxing. Oh, what book did you buy?"

Hirosue's throat made a gulping sound.

"Oh... um, it's a paperback. By Hisako Ando."

"Uh-huh. Is it interesting?"

Hirosue took just the paperback out and pushed the bag with the employment magazine to a corner of the room. He passed it to Matsuoka, who read the synopsis on the back.

"So these are the kinds of books you like, huh," he murmured. "I don't really read novels. I do have an interest in them, but there are so many books out there, I don't know where to start. Tell me if you know any that are interesting."

"Um. Sure."

Matsuoka flopped on his stomach in the *kotatsu* and flipped through the paperback. As his eyes skimmed the first page, they began to blink more and more frequently. Finally, Hirosue heard a soft *fwump* of the book closing, followed by a long, quiet inhale. *No way*, he thought as he peered into Matsuoka's face. The man was, in fact, fast asleep.

Hirosue had heard of certain people who were so bad with books that a few lines were enough to overcome them with an uncontrollable sleepiness. Maybe Matsuoka was one of those people, though it was broad daylight now and not nighttime.

Hirosue stared intently at Matsuoka's sleeping face. Sprinkled over the chin of his small face was the stubble that had jolted Hirosue back to reality. In the old days, facial hair meant a generous tuft below the nose and on the chin, and depending on the person it would look unpleasant and unclean. But nowadays, it was different. Matsuoka's stubble was thin enough to maintain an impression of crisp cleanliness, and was clipped in a neat shape. It looked good on him, and Hirosue

admitted he looked handsome. But there was no sexual attraction in that, and it did not arouse him in that sense.

At times, he felt guilty for feeling that way, but upon further thought, he realized that that was normal. A vast majority of men in the world did not feel sexually aroused by other men.

The distant sound of an ambulance siren outside caused Matsuoka's drooping eyebrow to twitch. Come to think of it, Matsuoka's eyebrows were also nicely shaped. After grimacing at the loud noise and shaking his head from side to side, Matsuoka's tightly closed eyelids slowly opened. He snatched off his glasses in annoyance and rubbed his eyes vigorously. Even when their eyes met, Matsuoka only stared absently at him, his slack mouth hanging half-open.

"...Sorry. I was sleeping, wasn't I?"

"Only for about five minutes."

"I'm really sorry."

"Don't apologize," Hirosue laughed. Matsuoka scratched his short hair.

"I've had to wine and dine clients until late on weekends, so I haven't been getting much sleep."

Even a harmless phrase like "wine and dine" felt like a thorn in his chest. Hirosue wasn't sure about what went on in the sales department, since it was out of his field, but he'd heard that Matsuoka was good at his work. Hayama, his former girlfriend, had said so. Even around Hirosue, Matsuoka was full of vibrant energy, wasn't afraid to speak up when he ought to, and was considerate towards others. Such an able man like Matsuoka was probably never on the receiving end of a layoff. Irritated by the self-pity slowly taking over his thoughts, Hirosue stopped thinking altogether.

"Go to sleep if you're tired," he told Matsuoka. "There's not much to do, anyway."

However, Matsuoka did not nap any longer. He stayed for about half an hour to chat, then left to go home. Although Hirosue had originally not wanted to see Matsuoka, he felt refreshed once he had actually talked to him. He was also happy that Matsuoka had come to see how he was doing after hearing he was unwell.

Hirosue took out the employment magazine from the paper bag which he had pushed away. It was no use troubling himself about the little things. He had no one else to blame but himself for his layoff, and being envious or resentful of people was not the way to go about coping with it.

Hirosue slowly turned the pages of the magazine, comparing the age requirements and salary sections.

Hirosue received an e-mail with a photo, saying that his older brother's baby was born. He couldn't help but smile at the sight of the flushed, monkey-like baby. It was wrinkly and cute. This was his brother's third child and long-awaited girl.

At the end of the e-mail, his brother had written, 'Have you gotten a new girlfriend yet?'. Hirosue replied with a congratulations, but he couldn't answer the part concerning the girlfriend. Last year, he had told his brother that he was seriously thinking about marriage with a person in his life. When Hirosue had gone home for new years, the whole family had gathered for the meal when his father had broached the topic.

"So, where's that girlfriend you said you wanted to marry?"

"We didn't work out," Hirosue had answered. There was no way he could say that his girlfriend had in fact been a man, much less that he and this man were still carrying on a rather strange sort of relationship that was neither friendship nor romance.

That week, Hirosue received no invitation to go out, since Matsuoka was on a business trip out of town. Hirosue went to a department store and bought a celebratory gift for his brother's baby. He went along with the sales associate's suggestions and bought a ready-made gift set of clothes and arranged to have it shipped. It wasn't much, but that alone was enough to make him tired. He sank down on a chair near the elevators. He didn't come to department stores often, and to be honest, he quite disliked them. They made him feel restless, like he didn't belong.

Maybe I'll have lunch at the set-meal place near the apartment, Hirosue was thinking absently, when someone called him from behind.

"Hirosue?"

He turned around to see Hayama standing there. Hayama was the same age as Matsuoka, and was a clerk for the sales department at headquarters. Last year, she had come to Hirosue's workplace at Koishikawa Laboratory for a few months to help out. That was when they got to know each other, and they had dated for a short time.

Hayama had gotten very beautiful while he had not seen her. He had already thought she was cute when they were dating, but it seemed as if she'd refined her look even more than before.

"Oh—long time no see."

He had been the one to break off their relationship because of everything that was happening with Matsuoka. After that, he had not contacted her again. Since their workplaces were far apart, they also never ran into each other.

When they broke up, Hayama had been crying. Perhaps because of that, Hirosue's strongest impression of her was her mournful expression. But Hayama now looked so renewed and unencumbered that it was enough to wash Hirosue's guilt and lingering hurt cleanly away.

"It must be... four months since I've seen you? Are you shopping, too?" Hayama asked.

"I came to buy a baby shower present for my brother."

"Congratulations," said Hayama, inclining her head slightly.

"I should be congratulating you. You're getting married, right?"

Hayama put a hand to her mouth and widened her eyes in surprise. "How do you know about that?"

"I heard from Matsuoka."

A middle-aged woman passed behind Hayama, holding paper bags in both hands. She bumped her bulging bags against Hayam's legs as she wedged herself by.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said the woman, but her body language and attitude clearly said she thought it was Hayama's fault for standing in the middle of the passage.

"Oh, want to have a seat?" Hirosue said, offering Hayama the seat across from him.

"I guess I should, since I'm apparently in the way," Hayama said wryly, and sat down.

"Hirosue, I didn't know you and Matsuoka were close."

"Um, well... we eat out together once in a while." He couldn't say that they saw each other

several times a week.

"I've never heard anything from Matsuoka about you two seeing each other. Oh. Maybe he didn't mention it because he felt bad for me," she murmured, then looked at Hirosue. "I met my fiancé through a marriage interview. I was never too enthusiastic about arranged marriages, but when I actually met him, he turned out to be really nice. After that, everything just fell into place. We'll be having the ceremony in July."

Hirosue felt like he could feel the happiness wafting over from Hayama as she smiled.

"What about you, Hirosue?"

"What about what?"

"Were you able to get back together with the girl you like?"

Hirosue smiled vaguely. "I'm not really sure if I can call it getting back together."

The Yoko Eto he had loved was never going to come back. Matsuoka was supposed to be the same as her on the inside, and though he had been able to acknowledge him as an important friend, Hirosue was still far from feeling anything romantic towards him.

"Is she being ambiguous?" Hayama asked.

Matsuoka's feelings were clearly romantic. But his own feelings were those of friendship, and he was in this fix because he wasn't able to say so. He didn't want to lose Matsuoka as a friend.

Hayama apparently took his silence for a yes. "I hope your feelings get across to her soon," she said sympathetically. "Speaking of which, how's work? You still have one unfilled vacancy, right? I'm sure you guys must be busy."

Just the topic of work was enough to dredge up his layoff in the back of his mind, and dark clouds instantly gathered over his heart. Hayama had no idea what a humiliating situation he was in.

"It's the same old," Hirosue said nonchalantly. "You?"

Hayama gave a short sigh. "Nothing new here, either. I've actually decided to quit at the end of March."

Hirosue had already heard from Matsuoka about her resignation, so he wasn't surprised.

"Maybe that's why," Hayama wondered aloud. "I feel a lot less pressure on the job compared to before. I don't get as irritated as I used to, and I can see everything in a better light."

Hayama lightly brushed up a strand of hair that had fallen across her cheek.

"You know there are a lot of people leaving the company at the end of the fiscal year, right?" she said. "The official announcement's on March 25, but the unofficial announcement is already out, so they have to redistribute the work of the people who are quitting. People who are actually on the scene seem to be having a hard time, especially Matsuoka."

"...What about Matsuoka?"

Hayama leaned forward a little and lowered her voice.

"The official announcement hasn't been made yet, so don't tell anyone," she warned.

"Apparently Matsuoka's going to be promoted to section manager of the sales department in the spring HR transfer. Since he'll have a lot more paperwork to do, he'll have to distribute the footwork to other people. But the people left behind already have to shoulder the work for the bunch of senior workers getting cut, see? So Matsuoka seemed to be pretty stuck about what to do."

"...What?" Hirosue asked in disbelief. "But Matsuoka's not even thirty yet, is he?"

Although it wasn't official, there was a sort of unspoken rule in their company that section managers had to be thirty or older. A worker in his twenties, no matter how competent, would never get further than supervisor.

"He's turning thirty in two days," Hayama said. "A Matsuoka fangirl in Sales told me. His sales performance is outstanding and his seniors like him a lot. It might be a little early for him to get promoted, but I don't think anyone will complain."

Hirosue balled his hands into fists in his lap. He knew Matsuoka was a capable man, but it was hard to have the fact flaunted in front of his face in a form as tangible as a promotion.

"Wow... that's amazing," he said for the sake of conversation while his heart turned black.

"Good at his work, good-looking, great personality—I think he's a little too perfect, don't you? He says it gets stressful, but he's not the type to show it."

They continued to make some small talk until they eventually parted.

"I hope things go well with you and the girl you like," Hayama said. Hirosue knew she had said those words from the bottom of her heart, but he still couldn't give her an answer. Hayama's face was glowing with happiness as she said she was going to meet her fiancée, and her steps were light when they parted. Hirosue watched her retreating back, feeling downtrodden as though he had been the one that was abandoned, even though he had broken up with her.

He let his imagination wander aimlessly on the train ride home. If they hadn't broken up, would he have gotten married to Hayama? Perhaps it really would have happened if he hadn't run into Matsuoka again. He sniffed derisively in self-contempt as he stared at the ground. It was a good thing that Hayama's relationship with him had ended. She had done the right thing by not staying with a man who couldn't even keep up a living.

Only when he drew up in front of his apartment building did Hirosue realize that he hadn't eaten lunch. It was already two in the afternoon. Feeling too lethargic to go out or buy something to eat, he entered his apartment on an empty stomach. He looked around, wondering if he still had any tangerines left, and the first thing that came into his vision was the employment magazine lying on top of the *kotatsu*.

Hirosue swept the magazine off the table, stuck his feet inside the *kotatsu*, and rolled over onto his back. The capable man was being promoted to section manager, while the incompetent one was being laid off. He could not even bring himself to laugh at the perfectly logical, yet ironic, contrast.

As he stared vacantly at the ceiling, a ringtone sounded in his room, signalling an incoming message. It was from Matsuoka. Hirosue turned off his cell phone without opening the e-mail.

When he finally did look at it, it was past eleven at night. Although he had ignored it, its existence had persisted in his mind.

'Would you like to go out for dinner the day after tomorrow?' It was the same kind of invitation e-mail he always received from Matsuoka. *He's turning thirty in two days.* He remembered Hayama's words. Matsuoka had celebrated Hirosue's birthday, but refused to tell his own. Yet here he was, still inviting Hirosue out for dinner. Was there some meaning behind it? Was Matsuoka fine with Hirosue not celebrating his birthday, as long as he could spend time with him? Or was Hirosue thinking too much, and was Matsuoka simply trying to arrange dinner plans?

A number of people had complimented the watch he had gotten from Matsuoka for Christmas

last year. It was the first time he'd been complimented for his belongings. Matsuoka had good taste.

Hirosue thought for a good while—about the unwavering fact that Matsuoka had celebrated his birthday; the fact that he had coincidentally come to know Matsuoka's birthday; and finally, his own honest feelings.

He needed to thank Matsuoka somehow. He felt guilty to be the only one to have a good time, but he didn't want to see Matsuoka in the state he was in, riddled with inferiority. Just hearing about it had been enough to put him in this state; there was no knowing how far his self-loathing would go if he saw Matsuoka face-to-face. It wasn't Matsuoka's fault. Matsuoka had done nothing wrong. It was his own problem and nothing else.

'When are you free this week?'

'I'm sorry. I'm busy this week,' he wrote back, even though he wasn't.

'Let's do something the week after, then. You seem pretty busy, but be careful not to overwork yourself,' came Matsuoka's reply.

He would probably not get any more e-mails for the rest of the day. Hirosue put his cell phone out of reach and closed his eyes. He felt ill with inferiority and guilt. Even while being buffeted by waves of self-loathing, Hirosue still did not want to see Matsuoka.

On the day of Matsuoka's birthday, Hirosue was still at a loss. 'Should I see him today?' he wondered, 'But then again,' he stalled. Since the man had feelings for him, he would probably be happy to see Hirosue on his birthday. But Hirosue himself did not want to. But still, Matsuoka had celebrated his birthday. He continued to go around in circles, and before long, he had finished his day's work.

Hirosue got home at six in the evening. He stood up and sat down over and over in his apartment, his restlessness showing no signs of subsiding. *It would be rude to see Matsuoka or celebrate his birthday as if it were a chore,* he gave as a legitimate-sounding reason, but he could still not convince himself. He knew he was just making convenient excuses.

Here he was, getting presents and having a good time while rejecting Matsuoka's tiny wish to have dinner with him, out of a completely personal reason that didn't even concern Matsuoka himself, at that.

At half past eight, Hirosue put on his coat and burst out of his apartment. He knew he would only feel miserable and sullen if he met up with the man, but if he didn't—he felt like he would regret it long into the future. *I should have made plans with him in the first place if I was going to end up doing this,* he thought, but it was too late for that now.

He took the train into the city, but all the department stores where he could have gotten last-minute presents were now closed. He checked his watch and it was past nine o'clock. It was no wonder the stores were closed. Feeling at a complete loss, Hirosue walked around the proximity of the department stores and found a street vendor selling silver accessories in front of a shuttered storefront. Accessories with dragons, eagles, and emblem designs were laid out closely on black cloth. Hirosue remembered Matsuoka wearing a ring of the same style.

He bent over to look. There were so many, he didn't know which one to choose. After much

debate, Hirosue bought a cell phone strap with a dragon charm. He didn't know Matsuoka's ring size, and as for necklaces, there were too many types to choose from. Now he was finished his shopping, at least, but the price was so low it was dubious if it would even qualify as a present. The only wrapping it had was a brown paper bag.

Hirosue put the gift—which was a gift in form only—into his pocket, then headed to a cake shop next. He knew there was one in the shopping district that was open late, and he bought a small cake there. He had them write 'Happy Birthday' on it. Now he had managed to get the semblance of a celebration together, but having bought the things, he now began to feel uncertain about whether Matsuoka would be happy to get such a cheap-looking present and cake.

Matsuoka didn't eat things like cake when they were together. He had no idea whether Matsuoka even liked sweet things or not. *I should have at least asked him beforehand what he likes to eat, or what things he likes in general.* His lack of planning skill knew no bounds. Hirosue detested himself for it.

He wrapped up his regretful shopping trip and reached Matsuoka's apartment past ten at night. He didn't call the man beforehand to say he was coming. If he did, he felt like he would falsely inflate Matsuoka's expectations.

He rang the intercom of Matsuoka's apartment, feeling like he was fulfilling a quota. There was no answer.

"Huh?"

He pressed it again. He could hear the buzzer going off inside the apartment, but he couldn't sense anyone's presence inside. Matsuoka probably wasn't home. Perhaps he was still working.

He had figured Matsuoka was free in the evening, especially if he had time to invite Hirosue out. What time was he coming back? In an hour, two hours? Would he be able to see Matsuoka before the date changed?

As Hirosue wondered helplessly how long he would have to wait under the cold winter sky, he suddenly realized something. There was no need for him to stay here until Matsuoka came home. Wasn't it good enough if he could get the celebratory gesture across to Matsuoka? If so, he would fulfil his wishes of not wanting to see him, while still showing Matsuoka that he had full intent to celebrate his birthday. It seemed like the best answer.

Hirosue hung the cake on the doorknob. He wondered if he should put the present inside, too, but it didn't seem very classy for a full-grown adult to do that, and decided against it. He made to go home, but felt like Matsuoka would simply throw the cake away if he didn't know who it was from. Hirosue had no paper or pen to leave a message. Faced with no other choice, he sent an e-mail.

'I left a cake in front of your apartment. Please have it, if you like.'

After sending the e-mail, he turned on his heel. Right as he pushed the down button on the elevator, his cell phone started ringing. It was the ringtone for an incoming call, not an e-mail. It was Matsuoka.

"Hirosue, where are you right now?" Matsuoka's voice was more tense than he had ever heard it.

"Where? Well, it's not really—"

The elevator door opened with a *ding*. There was no one inside.

"Wait, are you at my place?"

"Um, yeah."

"Wait there. I'm coming home."

He could hear noisy chatter on the other end of the cell phone. Was Matsuoka at an *izakaya*?

"Heeey, who're you talkin' to, Matsuokaaa?" he could hear a voice calling in the background.

"You don't have to bother," Hirosue said. "I'm going home, anyway."

"Really, I'll be home in five—ten minutes." There was a blip as his voice died.

"Huh? Matsuoka?"

The line went dead. Hirosue sighed heavily and flipped his cell phone shut. Matsuoka had celebrated his birthday and given him a gift. He felt guilty for not doing anything in return for Matsuoka's birthday. But that wasn't the only reason he had come here today.

For reasons he could not pinpoint, he had somehow imagined Matsuoka spending his birthday all alone by himself. If Hirosue hadn't come, he thought the man would spend a lonely night at home with no one to celebrate his birthday. When self-flattery went this far, it was sickening. Matsuoka turned out not to be so lonely as he had imagined, and he had friends who would celebrate with him on his birthday.

Hirosue wanted to go home. He was seized with an impulse to jump on the elevator right this moment, but he couldn't because Matsuoka had told him not to go home. Hirosue hung his head and went back to stand in front of Matsuoka's apartment, looking down past the handrails of the hallway at the road below. Men and women in office-worker garb occasionally walked past briskly.

About fifteen minutes after the line had gone dead, a taxi flashed its signals as it pulled to a stop at the sidewalk. A young office worker in a suit burst out of the car. It was too dark to see his face, but he felt like it was Matsuoka. The elevator sounded as it stopped. A figure tore out of the elevator car. It was Matsuoka, after all.

Matsuoka wheezed in front of Hirosue. *You didn't have to rush so much*, Hirosue found himself thinking as he cast a rather cool glance at the man.

"I thought... you said you had... errands to do today." Those were Matsuoka's first words.

"—The work I was supposed to do was... um, I finished it early." The lie to justify his circumstances stuck as it came off his tongue.

"Oh, okay. I didn't think I would get to see you, so I'm really glad. If I knew you were coming, I should've just said no to those guys."

"Who were you with?"

"Friends from university."

"...You should have taken your time and stayed behind." Hirosue really wished the man had done so. Matsuoka hunched his shoulders, oblivious to Hirosue's slightly snide remark.

"It's alright. Those guys just want an excuse to go drinking."

Matsuoka took the bag hanging from his doorknob.

"Is this the cake? It's huge."

"It's your birthday, right?"

Matsuoka spun around to face him.

"I ran into Ms. Hayama the other day. I heard from her that it was your birthday today."

Matsuoka's cheeks, slightly pink from running here, perhaps, turned beet-red as if they were set on fire.

"You treated me out to such a great meal for my birthday, so I'm sorry this is all I have for yours. I'll have your present ready later."

"You didn't have to worry about giving anything back." Matsuoka rubbed his flushed cheeks roughly with the back of his hand. His blush and sheepish grin was an expression Hirose had never seen before. Matsuoka carefully stroked the box with the cake inside.

"I'm so touched. It feels like a waste to eat this cake."

Seeing the man so overjoyed at a cheap cake made Hirose feel even more awkward.

"They said it wouldn't keep very long, so..."

"I guess so, huh. Oh, since you've come all the way here, why don't you come in and have some tea?"

"But..."

"Just one cup. You must be cold since the wind is pretty strong here."

Faced with more insistence than he had ever gotten from Matsuoka before, Hirose agreed just to have one cup, and went inside. He wanted to go home, but it was Matsuoka's birthday. He felt it would be rude to refuse too vehemently.

"I wasn't expecting to have people over, so it's kind of messy. Hope you don't mind." Magazines and newspapers were strewn across the floor in Matsuoka's apartment, but it wasn't as messy as he had made it seem. It was a two-room apartment with a living/dining room and a kitchen, almost too spacious for a man who lived by himself. In the middle of the sprawling living room was a deep brown sofa set. All the furniture was co-ordinated in dark brown, and the walls were a gentle ivory hue. The carpet was dark green. The apartment almost looked like a model home with its perfectly co-ordinated neutral shades. The stylish interior went well with Matsuoka's image, but Hirose felt slightly unsettled in the apartment.

He awkwardly took a seat on the sofa, and felt the cushions gently envelope his bottom. It was comfortable.

"Can I open it right away?" Matsuoka put the boxed cake on the coffee table and turned to ask him with sparkling eyes. When Hirose nodded in assent, Matsuoka took the cake gently out of the box.

"Whoa, it looks so good! Oh, and there's a message on it, too."

Matsuoka sat admiring the uncreative cake with red strawberries for a long while—several times longer than the amount of time Hirose had spent to pick the cake. He smiled blissfully for the whole time.

"Since you're here, Hirose, have some of the cake with me," he suggested.

"But I got it for you."

"These things taste better when you share them with people."

Hirose could not refuse him after that.

"Oh, I had something good, actually," Matsuoka murmured, and disappeared into the kitchen. He emerged again with a bottle of wine and wine glasses in hand.

They gave a toast over neat slices of cake and wine. Hirose mostly drank beer, or *sake*, if he

felt like it. He hardly ever drank wine, and the only difference he knew between white and red wines were their colours. Once, he had been treated to expensive wine when his boss had taken him out for drinks, but because he ended up finding out the price beforehand, he was too intimidated to pay attention to the taste.

"It was a gift, so it's probably not that expensive," Matsuoka had said, but the wine was smooth on the tongue, full-bodied, and delicious. He felt like it was classier by far compared to the cake he had bought.

Matsuoka eagerly ate the cake that Hirosue had not put much thought into buying, and sipped his wine elegantly.

Hirosue also finished eating his portion of cake. Eventually, heat gathered in his body and spread outwards; perhaps the alcohol from the wine was getting around his system. *I've done my job. I'll go home.* Hirosue gathered momentum to stand from the couch. His knees gave out weakly, and he ended up crumpling to his knees on the spot. Since he had been sitting, he hadn't realized he had drunk too much. He felt dizzy even while squatting. He laid his head back on the couch. He was overcome with a falling sensation as he felt his consciousness begin to fade.

"—Hirosue."

His shoulder was shaken, disturbing his comfortable slumber. Hirosue opened his eyes a crack with a disgruntled face.

"It's almost time for the last train. Are you going to stay the night or go home?"

"...I'll go home." Hirosue got up, scrubbing his eyes. He could barely take three steps before his unsteady feet gave out and he sank to the floor.

He couldn't be bothered to walk or to go home. Hirosue curled up on the floor like a cat. A set of fingers carefully and gently ran along his shoulder.

"You should stay the night."

"No... I'm going home." He staunchly insisted on going home while not even trying to get off the floor. In his shaky line of vision, he could see Matsuoka's troubled face. But even that grew blurry as Hirosue was drawn back into the depths of sleep.

A loud ringing sound made him squeeze his eyes shut. Hirosue pulled his blanket over his head, but the bothersome noise did not stop. Finally, he reluctantly got up and searched for the source of the sound. He grabbed the alarm clock sitting on the table. He fiddled with it, not knowing how to turn it off, until the sound stopped by itself.

The room was unfamiliar to him. With the clock in hand, he took in his surroundings. Matsuoka was curled up in a blanket at the foot of the sofa he had been sleeping on just earlier. He wondered what the man was doing there, and remembered that he had visited Matsuoka last night and they had eaten cake and drunk wine. His memories of them eating cake together grew hazy partway through, and near the end, they were a complete blur.

He peered at the clock and saw it was six in the morning. The first trains were already running.

"Matsuoka," he called, but there was no response. No matter how many times he repeated the man's name, it was no use. He remembered back when he had still been dating Matsuoka when he

was Yoko Eto. Hirosue used to give him a wake-up call every morning because he had trouble getting up.

"Matsuoka, wake up."

When Hirosue gave his shoulder a shake, Matsuoka's eyelids finally fluttered and opened a crack.

"Oh... morning."

"I'm going home now."

Matsuoka rubbed his eyes with both hands like a child and looked at the wall clock.

"Oh, six o'clock," he said. "That should give you enough time to go home and change, right?"

When Matsuoka set the alarm clock, it seemed he had calculated the time it would take for Hirosue to go back to his apartment. Matsuoka was considerate even in the details.

"Sorry about yesterday. Looks like I got a little drunk," Hirosue apologized.

Matsuoka's face relaxed into a sleepy grin. "Don't worry about it. I had fun."

"Fun?"

Matsuoka gave a big yawn and propped himself up.

"My first night of being thirty was such a whirlwind of happenings. Getting an e-mail out of the blue, rushing home, eating cake... all that."

Matsuoka chuckled as if to remember something. "You were talking in your sleep, Hirosue."

"Huh? What was I saying?"

"I'm not telling. It was pretty funny." Matsuoka hunched his shoulders and grinned mischievously. His face overlapped with Yoko Eto's smile, and Hirosue felt his heart skip a beat. Matsuoka bore barely any resemblance to Yoko Eto now; his hair and clothes were completely different from hers. But in unexpected moments like these, her image came fleetingly to the surface.

"Now I'm curious," Hirosue insisted. "Tell me."

"It wasn't much. We'll just say it's mine to keep to myself and enjoy."

"Oh, come on. That makes me want to know even more." Hirosue was desperate, but Matsuoka only smiled smugly.

"If you don't go home soon, you won't have time to change."

Hirosue somewhat grudgingly took his coat from Matsuoka at his urging. It wasn't wrinkled at all. Perhaps Matsuoka had put it on a hanger for him.

"Thanks for yesterday," Matsuoka said. "We should go out to eat sometime."

Matsuoka saw him to the door. Hirosue's shoelaces were loose, so he bent over at the doorway to tie them.

"This happened before, didn't it? Except in opposite positions," he heard a voice say above his head.

"Really?"

"When I still used to crossdress, remember I spent the night in your apartment on your birthday? That's what this reminded me of."

Hirosue recalled those bittersweet memories. He had been in love with Yoko Eto, Matsuoka's crossdressed form—so uncontrollably in love that he had spent the whole night holding her in his arms. Perhaps the situations were the same, but his feelings were different—completely different, even

though it was with the same person. In fact, Hirosue didn't feel happy at all about his current situation.

"See you, then." Hirosue dipped his head slightly and exited the apartment. The freezing air sliced his cheek. As soon as the door closed behind him, his mindset changed. No lingering feeling about being at Matsuoka's place trailed him. He began to think about things like whether he would have time to go home and shower.

"Hirosue, wait a second!" He heard a voice call above him just as he left the building. He looked up to see Matsuoka leaning over the railing of the passage on the fifth floor.

"I'm coming down. Wait there for a second."

Hirosue stopped, wondering what could be the matter. Matsuoka came bursting out of the building not even a minute later.

"I'm glad I caught you. I found this left behind in the apartment. It's yours, isn't it?"

Matsuoka was offering him a small brown paper bag. Hirosue remembered leaving it in his coat pocket. It must have fallen out at some point.

"You can have it."

"Huh?" Matsuoka tilted his head.

"Actually, never mind. I'll take it." The paper bag came back into Hirosue's hands. But even if he took it home, he knew he would have no use for this kind of thing. Hirosue offered the paper bag to Matsuoka again. Matsuoka looked confused to have something he had returned pushed right back at him.

"What? What's the matter?"

"It's a cell phone strap. You can have it, if you want."

"Cell phone strap?"

"I didn't know what kind you'd like. And it's cheap. If you don't like it, you can throw it away."

Matsuoka's face practically glowed.

"What?" he exclaimed. "You bought this for *me*?"

"It's really not much."

Wow, oh, geez, Matsuoka continued to gush under his breath as he carefully stroked the brown paper bag.

"Can I open it?"

"Um... sure."

The strap made a light clinking sound as it dropped from the overturned bag into Matsuoka's hand. What had looked decently tasteful at night now looked even more flimsy in the revealing rays of the morning sunlight.

"Hey, it looks slick," Matsuoka remarked. "I love this kind of design."

Matsuoka looked happy, but to Hirosue, it seemed like the man was just acting like it to be polite. He couldn't stand being there any longer.

"I'll be going, then."

"Thanks, Hirosue. See you."

Hirosue kept walking without turning back once. Every time he remembered Matsuoka's overjoyed face, he was pricked from all sides with regret and guilt. *I should have gotten a proper present,*

he thought. *I shouldn't have given him such a poor excuse for a gift.*

In the train, he sat down across from an office worker who was either commuting to work or heading home after working all night. The man's half-open mouth reminded him of Matsuoka pointing out that he had been talking in his sleep. Matsuoka must have been awake if he had heard him talking. He felt quite embarrassed at the thought that Matsuoka had seen him drunk and passed out.

That night, he had begged Yoko Eto to stay against her will, and had held her in his arms for the whole night. He had been so happy to have that slender and beautiful body close to him, he'd felt like he was dreaming, and he had ended up not catching a wink of sleep that night. Perhaps Matsuoka had felt the same way he did.

His chest suddenly tightened when he remembered those happy days. Yoko Eto and Matsuoka were the same person, but there was simply no way he could convince himself that the Matsuoka, with his goatee, who was a man no matter how you looked at him, was the same person as the woman whom he had worshipped like a goddess. Perhaps it wasn't that he wasn't convinced—perhaps he didn't want to be convinced.

He didn't hate Matsuoka as a man. He could also tell that Matsuoka cared for him devotedly and deeply. Hirosue didn't deny that sometimes he found it at once pitiful and endearing. But nowhere could he find the same sort of passion towards Matsuoka which he had harboured towards Yoko Eto.

Hirosue's vague resistance towards Matsuoka remained, yet if he was invited, he still went out to eat with Matsuoka. He didn't want to use a lie as an excuse to refuse, and besides, he didn't have to be conscious about his and Matsuoka's positions as long they didn't talk about work.

Hirosue began actively looking for a job, and on weekdays he took a few hours off work to be interviewed by a number of companies he had set his eyes on. The head clerk accepted his irregular work schedule without complaint when Hirosue explained truthfully what he intended to do. Instead, Hirosue went to work on weekends to make up for time taken off during the week. As a result, more often than not, he had to turn down Matsuoka's invitations.

Despite his efforts, each and every interview he attended resulted in rejection. His lack of qualifications and his age—being in his mid-thirties—seemed to be the biggest obstacles. 'If only you were in your twenties'—he didn't know how many times he had heard those words tumble from the lips of his interviewer.

That day during work, he got a call from a company he had been interviewed for. Hirosue was a firm believer of separating his work from his private life, and he never sent personal e-mails or made private phone calls during work hours. But the situation he was in didn't afford him that option anymore. Hirosue grabbed his cell phone and hastily ran out into the hallway. —The news was one of rejection. The call hit him the hardest, especially since he had been quite confident about his interview. After that, he found it hard to focus on his work at all.

Hirosue returned to his apartment, still feeling depressed, and found that a letter had come in the mail. A pretty stamp with the Chinese character for "celebration" was pasted on the envelope. The

mailer was Shimizu, a childhood friend from primary school, and the letter was a wedding invitation. Hirosue remembered when he had gone back to his hometown for the new year, Shimizu had told him that he had proposed to his girlfriend.

There was a written message inside. 'I'm getting married. How about you?' it read. Last new year, he had met up with Shimizu and told him about Yoko Eto. She was a beautiful woman, almost too good for a man like him, he had said, and had confessed that he was thinking of asking her to marry him.

"Lucky you," Shimizu had said enviously, who didn't have a girlfriend at the time. One year later, here he was in this state, and his childhood friend was now set to get married. How ironic it was.

The following evening after receiving the invitation from his childhood friend, Hirosue got a call from his older brother in the country. His baby shower gift, which had been out of stock for a while due to its popularity, had finally arrived. His brother had called to thank him as well as to catch up. Eventually the topic of Hirosue's childhood friend came up in their conversation.

"Say, remember Shimizu, that boy you used to be close with? I heard he's getting married, huh?"

"Yeah. I got an invitation." Hirosue talked to his brother in the phone while walking to his apartment from the bus stop.

"I remember *you* saying last new year that you had a girl you wanted to marry."

"I told you, she broke up with me." It was a topic that was insensitively brought up again and again, even though he didn't want to discuss it. He was starting to get sick of it.

"Aren't you dating anyone right now?" his brother asked.

"No," Hirosue said shortly. He couldn't be bothered to give a proper answer. "It's not that simple finding someone new." His brother apparently picked up on his irritable mood.

"What're you so pissed off about?" he grumbled, then suddenly said, "Hey, are you sure you aren't setting your standards too high?"

"I'm not."

"But you said your ex-girlfriend was pretty, right? As they say, it takes three days to tire of a beauty.⁵ If the girl has a great personality, who cares if her looks are so-so?"

"She was pretty, but I didn't fall in love with her for her looks."

She was beautiful, but that wasn't all. She was temperamental, like a cat, but gentle; she had her own firm opinions, and she wasn't afraid to speak up when she had to—she had that strict side about her, too.

The memory of her smile overlapped with Matsuoka's face, causing a guilty jolt in Hirosue's stomach. That day, he had unexpectedly seen the vestige of Yoko Eto in Matsuoka's smile. Perhaps it was wrong to call it a vestige; Yoko Eto and Matsuoka were, after all, the same person.

A doubtful question flitted across his heart. He had not fallen in love solely with Yoko Eto's

5 A common phrase in Japanese, "It takes three days to tire of a beautiful woman and three days to get used to an ugly one", meaning, no matter how beautiful a woman is, if her personality is horrible, one would get sick of her quickly. Conversely, if a woman's personality is charming, one eventually stops noticing her ugly looks.

looks. Her doll-like beauty hadn't been the only thing he was attracted to. But if it wasn't her face—if he had been drawn to her heart—then why wasn't he able to see Matsuoka, who was essentially Yoko, romantically? —Hirosue arrived at the same place he had arrived at dozens of times when he asked himself this question. It was because Matsuoka was a man.

"Do you plan to be alone forever?"

His brothers's voice dragged Hiro sue out of his thoughts and into the present.

"Not really, but..."

"If you're going to get married, I suggest you do it soon. I don't want to sound like our old man, but if you have kids past forty, you'll hit retirement before they reach age of majority."

He was being told precisely what he was dreading to hear.

"...I know that."

"But personally, I think staying single is a choice, too. As long as you have a solid living foundation and you've got money saved up for retirement."

At the last minute of the conversation, he was met with a heavy figurative blow to the stomach. Hiro sue hung up the phone with his mood none the lighter. It was painful to be told to build a solid living right after getting a layoff notice.

Hirosue's mood remained in the gutters even after he arrived back at his apartment. He had just picked up his wallet, intending to go out to buy some liquor, when he got an e-mail from Matsuoka. Matsuoka's work had finished early, and he was wondering if Hiro sue would like to go out for dinner. Hiro sue figured that being alone would only fill his head with unneeded worries. Since he felt like drinking, anyway, he answered that he would go.

When Hiro sue arrived at their meeting spot at the station, Matsuoka was already there. He was standing off in a corner of the ticket stands, staring intently at his cell phone. Dangling from his silver phone was the cheap cell phone strap that Hiro sue had given to him. Just the sight of it made him feel guilty.

That day, on Matsuoka's request, they went to a quieter restaurant instead of their usual *izakaya*. It was a little pricier, but the tables were neatly sectioned off, and the chatter wasn't as clamorous.

"Did you have a bad day today?"

Hirosue, who had been distractedly prodding his *jijim*,⁶ lifted his head. Perhaps Matsuoka had noticed that his responses sounded absent-minded.

"Not really."

"Alright. I was just wondering. You seem kind of down."

"I'm fine," he said, but his mood didn't get any lighter. The earlier conversation with his brother lingered stubbornly in his head. It wasn't like he didn't want to get married; he just didn't have someone that kind of person in his life.

"Say, you're going to work on your days off a lot lately, aren't you?"

Hirosue's weekends were consumed by work to make up for the time taken off on weekdays for his job search. All the interviews he had shuffled his schedule around for had ended in miserable

6 A Korean savoury pancake which can contain sliced meat, poultry, seafood, and vegetables. Eaten as an appetizer or along with alcoholic drinks.

defeat. Labour without rewards only increased his exhaustion. He fell into a spiral of self-loathing with every refusal. *I'm not good enough. In the end, I'm just not good enough.*

"It's just really busy since we have to manage on a staff shortage," he said, using an offhand excuse since he couldn't bring himself to say the truth.

"Then maybe it's not a good time to say this, but... are you free next Saturday and Sunday?"

After his most recent refusal from the company for which he'd had the highest hopes, Hirosue had gotten sick of sending in CVs and attending interviews, and had stopped his job search altogether. As such, he had following weekend off like he usually did.

"Is there something going on?"

"I was wondering if you'd want to go to the hot springs," Matsuoka said, glancing up at him furtively.

"Hot springs?" Hirosue tilted his head.

"There's this hot spring resort I've been wanting to go to. It's about a three-hour drive from here. We can stay the night and relax, or if you'd rather not, we can just make it a day trip. Oh, and I'll drive."

The hot springs sounded like an attractive idea. Hirosue liked large baths to begin with. He wanted to relax and forget, even for a short time, about the difficulty of finding employment and the pressure from his older brother. One thing that nagged him was that it would be with Matsuoka. If they were staying the night, did that mean he had *those* kinds of expectations? But he was also willing to go on a day trip, so perhaps he had no ulterior motives.

As Hirosue continued to contemplate, Matsuoka hesitantly spoke up.

"...If it bothers you to be with me, we can go to the baths at different times," he said.

If Matsuoka was seeking consent for something as innocent as bathing together, it was unlikely that he was expecting sex, or anything of that sort. Hirosue's fears that Matsuoka would try to make advances on him turned out to be needless worries after all. Once that nugget of uncertainty was removed, a mini-trip to the hot springs seemed like a good change of scene.

"A trip wouldn't hurt once in a while, I guess."

"Really?" Matsuoka looked attentively at him, his face like a child's the day before a school field trip. "So, do you want to make it a day trip or a weekend trip?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Can I make it a weekend trip?"

"Sure."

"Awesome," Matsuoka murmured, making a triumphant fist with this right hand. "See, I actually have my eye on a few hot spring inns. All of them come with really luxurious dinners. I want the dinner, so a weekend trip it is. I'll take care of the reservations and all that."

It seemed like he had been doing all sorts of research on the Internet. "My first choice has an outdoor bath," Matsuoka chattered excitedly. "My second choice comes with Tajima beef *shabu-shabu*,⁷ and the room is huge. Man, I don't know which one to pick."

Hirosue found himself struggling to keep up with Matsuoka's high spirits. He was excited to

⁷ Tajima beef is also known as Kobe beef, a delicacy. *Shabu-shabu* is similar to *sukiyaki*, where thinly-sliced beef and vegetables are boiled in water and dipped in sauce before eating.

go to the hot springs, but not as much as Matsuoka.

He honestly wondered what the man could be so happy about. Was it because he was going on an outing with Hirosue? What could he possibly enjoy about being in the company of a man who was dull, clumsy at conversation, and couldn't even find a new job?

Hirosue figured Matsuoka was popular among the girls. He had also heard that Matsuoka's former lover was a woman. For him, it probably didn't have to be a man—so why had he chosen him? What was so good about a pathetic, boring man like him?

I'm not all that you think I am, Hirosue muttered quietly in his heart.

Koishikawa Laboratory only had four administrative staff including the head clerk. They usually had five personnel, but one member had taken an extended sick leave, so essentially they had to manage the same amount of work with one less person. Just when they entered March, one of the administrative girls was hospitalized with a broken hip from snowboarding. The loss hit them hard, as they were barely managing with four people. To make things worse, another administrative staff requested sick leave two days after that. He had been diagnosed with early-stage cancer, and he had been told that he had a high chance of complete recovery if he had an operation early. His hospital stay including the surgery would be three weeks, which happened to overlap with the end of the fiscal year. Two people leaving at this time of year meant dire circumstances. "Critical hit" was an understatement—the department was practically a sunken ship. But since this worker's matter was one of life and death, even the head clerk hadn't been able to tell him to hold off his operation until April.

Hirosue had no time to be job searching anymore. It was almost the end of the fiscal year, yet they still had mountains of work to do. The head clerk was also waging a desperate battle with the documents, but the work was barely getting done. Consecutive shifts past midnight did not diminish their workload; in fact, it kept on increasing. Just when they thought they had reached the end of their rope, divine help came in the form of a temporary staff from headquarters who would fill in for a limited time until the end of the fiscal year. It was Hayama.

Hayama had been sent to Koishikawa Laboratory last year, as well, as a pinch hitter. Since the temp would be filling in for two people, Human Resources had apparently done some thinking for once and sent over someone who was experienced.

Although there were no feelings left between them, Hayama was still someone Hirosue had once dated. If they were to work together, they would be spending long periods of time in each other's company. This was different from running into each other on the street and having a short chat. Hirosue worried that things would be awkward, but it was a needless concern. Hayama herself did not seem to be conscious of Hirosue in that way at all. He had been the only one endlessly brooding over it. Seeing as how she had found someone new soon after breaking up, perhaps women were simply more decisive in cutting loose and moving on.

It was the second day of Hayama's assignment to the lab. The head clerk had left at six in the evening, citing an errand, and Hirosue and Hayama stayed behind in the office. *I think I can manage to leave at nine today,* Hirosue was thinking to himself, when suddenly Hayama gave a shout from the

desk beside him.

"Ugh, I can't take this anymore!"

Hirosue whipped around in surprise.

"Oh... sorry." Hayama blushed and ducked her head. "I keep making wrong word conversions. And I'm barely getting any work done."

Hirosue himself was also weary of the sheer amount of documents and menial tasks, but given the situation, it couldn't be helped, so he had simply resigned himself to it. But Hayama couldn't be blamed for thinking "why me" or for feeling she had gotten the short end of the stick, since she had suddenly been shipped over from headquarters.

Hirosue looked at his watch. It was a little past seven in the evening.

"Ms. Hayama, you can go home for today. I don't think it'll take me that long to handle the rest by myself."

Nine o'clock might stretch to ten o'clock, but it wasn't much of a difference.

"No, no, don't mind me."

"But..."

Hayama smiled slightly. "You're the same as ever, Hirosue, aren't you?"

"What do you mean, same as ever?"

"How you are."

He didn't know what she meant, but they smiled when their eyes met. They both ended up staying until eight-thirty to finish the remaining work together, and took the taxi into the city. They had decided to grab something to eat before going home.

Hayama knew an Italian restaurant that was open late, so they went there. Hirosue preferred lighter Japanese fare over Western food, but the pasta here was seasoned with zesty garlic and was very delicious.

"Back at headquarters, we administration people usually finish at six o'clock as long as things aren't busy," Hayama said. "I had plans for cooking classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but just when I was in my last month of work, they suddenly sent me over here. I thought I could take it easy, so I was disappointed. Not to mention how insanely busy it's been since I came over here." Hayama sighed glumly.

"I'm really sorry you have to go through this, Ms. Hayama."

"Don't apologize. It's not your fault. But have you noticed? Maybe it's because of the state we're in, but don't you think the head clerk has actually started doing his job?"

A chuckle escaped Hirosue's lips. Come to think of it, she was right. It was still a problem, though, that he had to be cornered into doing his work.

Their drinks flowed freely when they vented about work like this. Talking with Hayama made him feel a sort of slight nervousness that came from interacting with a woman, but also an odd camaraderie that came from suffering the same ordeal.

"Say, you and Matsuoka go out to eat a lot, don't you?" Hayama asked.

"Uh, yeah." Hirosue kept his answer short, shying away from the topic.

"Maybe Matsuoka wants to feel comforted by you, too."

"Comforted?"

He hadn't been expecting that word to come out of Hayama's mouth.

"You're comforting to have around, Hirosue."

"...It doesn't feel that way for me."

"I really think you are."

Their desserts were brought, and a smile spread across Hayama's face as soon as she saw the them daintily arranged on the plate. Hirosue and Hayama had ordered different sets, so their desserts were also different. Hirosue saw Hayama glance at his dessert.

"Want it?" he said, offering her the plate.

"Oh, no. I didn't mean it like that." Hayama shook her head hurriedly.

"I don't like sweets that much, so. Here." He placed the plate close to Hayama.

"Thank you," she mumbled, her face slightly bowed. Her blush had spread to her neck. It was cute.

"I feel like such a pig." Still leaving the remnants of a blush on her cheeks, Hayama extended her spoon to the dessert that Hirosue had given her. As soon as she took a bite, a look of bliss crossed her face. She took three more bites in a row before suddenly looking up.

"Speaking of Matsuoka, have you heard from him about his girlfriend?"

Hirosue swallowed. "Is he dating someone?"

"It seems like it. I always used to ask him if he had a girlfriend, and he'd just worm his way out of the topic. But a little while ago, I saw him fiddling with his new cell phone strap looking really happy, so I asked him who he got it from. He said he got it from the person he loves."

The tension left Hirosue's shoulders. He had thought perhaps Matsuoka had feelings for someone other than himself, but a little bit of thinking would have made him realize he was wrong. There was no way a man like Matsuoka, who channelled his feelings so devotedly towards him, would look at someone else like that.

"He said he'd always loved that person. But he wouldn't tell me what kind of girl she is. Mako said... oh, you know the girl who came camping with us last summer? Apparently Matsuoka told her that he couldn't date her because he has one-sided feelings for someone else. Come to think of it, it was the same for me, too. You told me you couldn't forget about the person you used to date."

"I'm sorry," Hirosue blurted.

"I wasn't blaming you," Hayama added. "Those things can't be helped. When you can't forget about someone, it's not a matter of logic. But I'm glad things are going well for Matsuoka. How about you, Hirosue?"

"Me?"

"You told me you 'got back together but not really' when we talked at the department store."

He didn't know how to express his current situation. If he were to choose a phrase that fit—

"I feel like I'm in a one-sided love and I'm never going to be requited."

"What do you mean?" Hayama cocked her head.

"It's true that she's the person I used to love, but I feel like she somehow isn't. The impression I had of her before is so strong, I keep feeling like something's off. Even when we're together, I just feel like the sparks have... fizzled. I mean in the romantic sense."

"I don't really get what you're trying to say."

"I can't really explain it well, either," Hirosue said sheepishly.

"But she's the same girl, right? The girl you used to love?"

"Yeah, but..."

"Then what do you find wrong about it, Hirosue?"

"I don't know."

He did know. He knew. Matsuoka had a great personality, and he was nice. But he was a man. It wasn't working out because Matsuoka was a man. Hayama thought for a little, then slowly opened her mouth.

"Hirosue, I'm wondering if maybe you had really lofty ideals for that girl."

"Ideals?"

"If she's the same person but she feels different to you, and nothing has changed about her, that means the way you see her has changed, Hirosue."

The way he saw her. His ideals for the beautiful woman. Hirosue was aware that he was once in love with Yoko Eto to the point of obsession. He wasn't attracted to her appearance, but her beauty was also part of who she was.

He had wanted her to love him back—that was all he had thought of. And Matsuoka, whose heart was the same as hers, did love him. Hirosue was in the very situation he had wished so hard for in the past, yet he found himself hesitant to step forward. He stood rooted to the spot before an insurmountable wall, which was the fact that Matsuoka was a man.

If Matsuoka had not changed at all apart from his appearance, then perhaps he was the one who had changed.

After they finished their meal, he and Hayama walked to the station together, where they parted ways. As he was bumped along on the train, he thought about Matsuoka. It wasn't like he hated him. He liked the man, enough to wish that they could be friends long into the future.

The hanging handles on the train swayed back and forth in unison. Was it wrong for him not to be able to love Matsuoka? Was it wrong want to steer his changing feelings into those of friendship and not love? Was it wrong justify what he was doing? That was all Hirosue thought about on the way home, so much so that when he saw Matsuoka in front of his apartment door, he was stunned. He thought perhaps he was seeing an illusion from thinking about him too much.

"Sorry for coming at such a late hour," Matsuoka said with a stiff smile under the dim lights in the passage. "My work finished late. I was in the area, anyway, so I thought I'd just drop by." The real Matsuoka spoke. Hirosue let out a short breath and drew up to the man standing near the door.

"You should have e-mailed me if you were here."

As Hirosue was drawing his key out of his bag, the man's spoke behind him.

"Was there something inconvenient about me coming?"

He detected something sharp in his words. This surprised him all the more because Matsuoka wasn't the type to throw covert verbal daggers like this.

"There's nothing inconvenient. I was just saying if you'd e-mailed me, I could have come home a little earlier."

Matsuoka looked down. He looked angry, at least in Hirosue's eyes. Hirosue felt bewildered.

"I finished work late today, so I was having dinner with Ms. Hayama," he said, while opening

the door. "Want to come in and have a cup of tea? You must've been cold out here."

"—I know." When Matsuoka lifted his face, his expression was back to his usual one. "I got an e-mail from Hayama saying you guys were having dinner."

"Is that so?"

"She said you guys vented about work and stuff."

"Oh. It's really busy right now, so I think Ms. Hayama was stressed out as well."

Matsuoka stepped inside the apartment after Hirosue. When Hirosue poured some coffee and came back, a few sheets of colour copies had appeared on the *kotatsu* table.

"What's this?"

"I printed out a few sheets from the website of the inn we'll be staying at on Saturday. I remembered you said you didn't really go on the Internet much."

"It's true. Thanks for taking the trouble."

Hirosue flipped through the printed sheets in order. The ambiance was nice, and the baths looked spacious. Most importantly, there was an outdoor bath.

"Is it really that hard at work?" Matsuoka asked. "I know Hayama went to support you guys, but..."

Hirosue continued looking through the sheets as he answered.

"Two people took sick leave at the same time. We were already stretched thin doing the work of four people with three, so..."

"You don't really complain to me, do you, Hirosue?"

Hirosue looked up, feeling something accusatory in the man's words.

"I think it would be tiring to listen to me complain."

"But you'll talk to Hayama about it, right?"

The man's gaze was steely. And there was something about his tone that nagged him. Matsuoka was acting strange today. Hirosue had a feeling from the beginning that the man was angry, but he had no idea what Matsuoka was so irritated about.

"We just have a lot of common topics to talk about, since we do the same job."

"I'm sorry."

A sudden apology. One minute the man seemed angry, and the next minute, he was suddenly apologizing. Hirosue couldn't make any sense of it.

"Why are you apologizing?" Hirosue asked, baffled.

"I think I'm gonna go home after all." Matsuoka grabbed his bag and coat and practically fled out of Hirosue's apartment. Hirosue stared in bewilderment at the cup of coffee that Matsuoka had left behind, still warm and not even half finished. He had no idea what Matsuoka had come for. He had brought information about the inn, but was that really all he had come to do?

Hirosue got an e-mail about thirty minutes after Matsuoka had left.

'I'm sorry for coming over out of the blue today,' it said.

From the e-mail, Hirosue couldn't sense any residue of Matsuoka's strange attitude earlier.

'I didn't really mind,' Hirosue wrote back, but he received no more e-mails from Matsuoka for the rest of the night.

Hirosue was so busy at work, he thought he might have to come into the office during the weekend—it was thanks to Hayama that he managed to get Saturday and Sunday off. On the Friday before the trip, however, Hirosue worked extra overtime so he wouldn't leave any work unfinished. By the time he got home to his apartment, it was two in the morning.

On the day of their one-night trip to the hot springs, Matsuoka came to pick him up by car. Matsuoka arrived right on time, true to his punctual nature. Hirosue rubbed his sleepy eyes and left his apartment with his bag in hand.

Matsuoka was wearing a simple outfit of a fitted long-sleeve shirt with khaki-coloured pants. They were the kind of clothes you'd see anywhere, but it was strange how fashionable they looked just because Matsuoka was wearing them. Hirosue looked at his own outfit of corduroy pants and a thick wool shirt. He had taken care to choose the nicer articles among his casual clothes, but now he felt embarrassed at how incredibly unfashionable they looked. *Matsuoka doesn't say anything, but I bet he doesn't think I have very good fashion sense*, he thought, beating himself up over the most trivial of matters.

The radio was playing in the car. Matsuoka had told him to bring some CDs along if he had any, since the ride would be a lengthy one. But Hirosue wasn't very interested in music, and he hadn't bought a CD in years.

The hot spring resort was accessible by highway, which could get them there in about two hours. Matsuoka, however, faithfully kept to the regular roads, perhaps as a courtesy to Hirosue who wasn't comfortable with cars and high speeds. Hirosue assured him he was fine with taking the highway, but Matsuoka only smiled and said he wanted to take his time driving.

Hirosue knew that staying awake was the least he could do to be polite, since he was already making Matsuoka drive by himself for a long period of time. But the repetitive scenery, warm car, and his lack of sleep the night before made an unfortunate combination. Hirosue was soon overtaken by a powerful drowsiness. His eyelids drooped even while he spoke.

He fought back against his sleepiness a number of times until he finally gave in and fell right into the clutches of sleep. He woke up from a slight lurch. It looked like they were at a red light, for the car was not moving.

"Damn it," Hirosue clicked his tongue quietly.

"What? What's wrong?" Matsuoka turned around and asked.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to nod off."

"Don't worry. You can go back to sleep."

"But you've been driving the whole time."

"It's okay. Driving is how I let off steam. You worked late yesterday, right?"

"Well," Hirosue said, raking the back of his head. He looked at Matsuoka's face. "Did I tell you I was working late yesterday?"

"No. —When I phoned Hayama yesterday, the topic turned to you, and she said it seemed like you were staying behind really late."

"Oh. I see."

Matsuoka and Hayama knew each other for longer than Hirosue knew them. It was no

surprise if they kept in touch regularly.

"Hayama said she's really glad you're at Koishikawa," Matsuoka said. "She said it can get pretty tough when it's so busy and she can't get along with the head clerk, but she said she feels comforted when she talks to you. I asked her if it's awkward working with her ex-boyfriend, but she says it isn't at all. Is that usually the way it is?"

Hirosue chuckled. "I felt a little awkward when I first heard she was being transferred over. But as for Ms. Hayama, she seemed to be totally over it. No hard feelings at all. I guess it's because she's getting married."

"Uh-huh," Matsuoka grunted in reply. "Hayama said you two talk a lot."

"We're the only two in the office apart from the head clerk," Hiro sue explained. "Most of the time, it's more like me listening to her talk. It was like that when we were dating. Right now, half of what we talk about is work, and the other half is about her fiancé."

"Isn't that, like, hard for you?"

"Hard?"

Matsuoka threw a glance at him. "Having to listen to your former girlfriend talk about her current fiancé."

Hirosue shrugged. "It doesn't bother me. I only dated Ms. Hayama for a short time, and even then we were more like friends than a couple."

"You don't have any attachments or anything?"

No, Hiro sue tried to say, then remembered his conversation with Hayama when he bumped into her at the department store. "After we broke up, I did wonder what it would have been like if I got married to her. In conclusion, she was right not to have ended up with me."

She had done the right thing by not choosing the kind of man who would get laid off. Hiro sue meant it as a self-derogatory joke, but there was no way Matsuoka could understand it, since he had no idea.

"Marriage is pretty important to you, huh, Hiro sue." Matsuoka's tone was decisive.

"Why would you think so?"

After a slight pause, Matsuoka spoke. "Because with Yoko Eto, you started talking about marriage pretty early."

"Well, that," Hiro sue said with a smile, "wasn't so much about marriage itself. I just wanted to make her mine as soon as possible. I thought marriage might be the fastest way to achieve that."

Even now, his heart contracted painfully when he thought about Yoko Eto—even if he knew that the man sitting in the driver's seat beside him was the same person. Their conversation lapsed for a little after that, and the car radio filled the silence between them until they entered the hot springs region.

The inn that Matsuoka had arranged for them was a traditional Japanese *ryokan*⁸ in the outskirts of the hot springs. Contrary to the few hotel-style inns they had spotted in the heart of the hot springs, the inn Matsuoka had chosen was old but well-maintained. It was reminiscent of the good days of the past, and the word "rustic" described it perfectly. Its old wooden doors and dark, glossy moss-covered cobblestone also lent to its mood. Hiro sue preferred these types of buildings over the

8 A traditional Japanese-style inn.

modern, sleek kind.

They were greeted at the door with reverence in true *ryokan* fashion, and were shown to their room. The *tatami*-floored room was spacious, and Hirosue was overjoyed when he opened the window and saw a small garden and a pond outside, all fenced in by bamboo.

Hirosue stared absently out the window while sipping the tea that the parlourmaid had poured for them. The *tatami* flooring and *tokonoma* alcove in the room almost tricked him into thinking he was back at his house in the country. Although it was his first time here, it didn't quite feel like it. Hirosue felt all the muscles in his body release their unnecessary tension.

Matsuoka was sitting on the floor cushion with his legs flung out. When he saw Hirosue lie down on the *tatami*, he also rolled over onto his back beside him. Their eyes met at ground-level, and that was enough to make them laugh. Matsuoka rolled over onto his stomach and inched closer to Hirosue.

"You know, I feel like I'm the kind of adult that people tell you not to become." Matsuoka's face was grave.

"Why?"

"Because we just got to the inn and I'm already lazing around."

"That's this place is for, to take away your exhaustion from everyday life. You're doing it right."

"I guess I am," Matsuoka murmured with such a serious expression on his face that Hirosue burst out laughing.

"What're you laughing at?" Matsuoka said, jutting out his lip this time. His expression reminded Hirosue of his nephew, and he reached out to stroke the sullen man's head.

"If you're feeling restless because you're not doing anything, it's probably a sign that you work too much, Matsuoka. You can forget about work for today and tomorrow. Let's relax."

Matsuoka's short hair was softer than he'd imagined. Matsuoka's face gradually reddened as Hirosue continued to stroke his head, and the man buried his face in the floor cushion as if to hide it.

"What's wrong?"

"...I'm not a kid, you know." His voice was muffled against the floor cushion.

"I know. But it's cute. —When you get sullen, you remind me of my nephew."

Matsuoka's blush spread to his ears. When Hirosue humorously gave the man's ear a light pinch, he felt the heat on his fingertips.

"I said stop..." Matsuoka mumbled weakly in protest, his voice at once submissive and inviting. His face was hidden. It was only his voice, yet its unexpectedly sensual tone threw Hirosue off guard. Agitated, he quickly withdrew his fingers. He was the one feeling embarrassed now.

It was warm inside the room, and the *tatami* felt comfortable, the silence was just right. After a few small yawns, Hirosue fell asleep before he even knew it.

He woke up to the sound of footsteps crossing back and forth in the hallway. He felt a presence right beside him. A gentle pair of eyes were looking down on him. That tranquil expression reminded him of someone—*oh, Ms. Yoko. They really are the same person*, he realized, albeit a little late.

Hirosue rubbed his eyes vigorously.

"Sorry. I fell asleep again," he apologized. Matsuoka laughed.

"It wasn't for that long. Maybe about twenty minutes."

His heart fluttered uncomfortably as they stared at each other. The sensation unsettled him, and Hirosue sprang up with momentum, shaking his head lightly.

"Wanna go take a bath or something?" Hirosue asked. He thought he saw Matsuoka's shoulders twitch slightly at his question.

"Um. Sure."

"I want to soak in the outdoor bath, but it looks pretty cold outside, huh?"

"It should be fine. The website said it's right by the indoor baths, so you don't have to walk much."

"Oh, I see."

As Hirosue pulled his change of clothes out of his bag, a voice spoke up behind him.

"Want me to wait 'til you get out?"

"We can just go together. Why?" When Hirosue turned around, Matsuoka studied him carefully.

"—You won't be disturbed going in with me?"

Hirosue felt a flash of guilt at the man's knowing eyes. He vividly recalled the night of his birthday when he had pushed Matsuoka away. He hadn't felt any resistance towards the kiss itself. Like last time, he'd probably be fine as long as he didn't feel anything overly "male" against his skin. But—

"I won't be disturbed," Hirosue answered decisively, but the end of his sentence wavered uncertainly. He suddenly lost his confidence as anxiety reared its head inside him. What would he think when he saw Matsuoka naked? Would he just see it as a man's body, or would it induce some emotion kind of emotion in him—repulsion or something else? He hadn't the faintest idea.

Matsuoka was smiling in an uncertain way.

"I'll take a bit of a break before I head over. Go ahead, Hirosue. I'll come after you later."

Matsuoka casually suggested they bathe separately, as if to sense Hirosue's hesitation. Hirosue didn't have the courage to insist they go together. He went on ahead to the hot springs, feeling a little guilty all the while.

It was a small inn, and since it was the middle of the day, the men's bath was deserted. The bath itself was spacious, and there were seven washing stations. On the whole, it was of an orthodox design, and the dark-green tiles gave off a retro feel.

Hirosue quickly washed his body and eagerly sank into the bath. It was slightly on the hot side, and it felt nice. The water was a milky-white hue, slightly slippery to the touch, and smelled of sulphur.

Although he was concerned about Matsuoka, he admitted he was also simply happy to have the hot spring all to himself. He swam around inside the bath, since no one was around to tell him off. It was a modest but unparalleled luxury.

He went through the door on the right side of the washing stations to find an outdoor bath built with stone. It was well-aged with an air of rustic beauty. There was an exhilaration that came from the open air, and since there were no high fences around, the view was spectacular. He could see the entire town below. In the car, he had noticed they were going up quite far into the mountains.

Now that he was looking down from the top, he realized just how high they had come.

Hirosue savoured his solitude in the soothing bathwater and beautiful scenery. There was nothing like undisturbed bliss, but once he got used to that, he felt a strong urge to talk to someone. He wanted to share this scenery and the comfort of this hot spring with someone. *Matsuoka didn't have to go out of his way for me. He should have just come*, he thought insensitively.

Hirosue returned to the indoor bath and soaked in the water again. The water inside felt slightly hotter than the outdoor bath. The door to the change room slid open with a rattle. He thought it was Matsuoka, but it was a pair of two men around fifty who came in. Was Matsuoka planning not to come until he got out? The thought had just crossed his mind when Matsuoka finally appeared.

When he saw Hirosue, he raised his right hand lightly in acknowledgement before sitting at the washing station. He was thin. Hirosue had always thought the man was slim, but once he was without clothes and in his bare skin, his thinness was almost painfully stark. —Hirosue had taken that body for his once, but he didn't feel like he did. He had been drunk, and he barely remembered what had happened that night. If he had remembered, he would probably feel unbearably uncomfortable at seeing Matsuoka's bare flesh in the open like this.

Matsuoka carefully washed his slender arms and legs before slipping inside the bath. He was a little far away, so Hirosue half-swam closer to him.

"That took you long."

Matsuoka hunched his shoulders. "Not to be like you, but I kind of fell asleep," he murmured, then covered his mouth and gave a small yawn. His exposed throat was white, and a faint tinge of colour was in his cheeks.

"The temperature's perfect, isn't it?" he said. "Have you gone to the outdoor bath yet?"

"Yeah. The view was really nice."

"It said on the Internet that the outdoor bath is pretty good, too. But it looks cold outside. I think I'll warm up here a little before I go."

Matsuoka's hand-towel sat folded on his head, as he stared up at the ceiling and emitted a short, blissful sigh.

"Hot springs are great. I feel all my tiredness floating away."

"You're certainly right about that," Hirosue agreed. "Matsuoka, are things hectic for you around this time, too?"

"You mean at work? Sales is always bogged down at the end of the fiscal year, so it's nothing new. Why?"

"You look like you've gotten thinner."

There was a splash as the towel fell from Matsuoka's head into the water. Matsuoka scooped it up hastily and was wringing it outside the edge of the bath. His neck and his face went from pink to red as if dipped in dye.

"What's wrong?"

"Wh—What do you mean?" Matsuoka pressed his towel to his face.

"Are you not feeling very well? Your face is red."

Matsuoka lowered his face and fell silent. He was acting odd.

"Did you look?" he asked in a small, hoarse voice.

"Look at what?"

"You know..." Matsuoka mumbled. It was then that Hirosue finally realized that he was talking about his naked body. He hadn't meant it to be sexual, but he found himself getting embarrassed anyway.

"I didn't stare or anything. I just saw a little when you were washing." But it was still true that he had looked. "I'm sorry," he apologized.

Matsuoka propped his chin on the edge of the bath and looked down. "I'm a bit dizzy from soaking too long," he murmured.

"Are you alright?"

When Hirosue touched his shoulder, Matsuoka flinched so violently that he felt taken aback. Startled at the man's reaction, Hirosue quickly withdrew his hand.

"Oh. Sorry."

"I'm going to get out. You should stay behind and relax, Hirosue." Matsuoka got out of the bath and left, barely minutes since he had come in to soak. Hirosue was ridden with shame as if he'd just sexually harassed someone. He had thought nothing about looking at Matsuoka's naked body, since they were both men. But for Matsuoka, who loved him, perhaps being seen naked carried a special kind of meaning.

Hirosue also got out of the bath soon afterwards, but Matsuoka was not in the change room. He was probably back in their room. Hirosue wasn't sure how he ought to act once he got back. He wanted to go back to their room, but he couldn't; he spent thirty minutes in the change room struggling with his dilemma. After agonizing for a good while, he bought a can of juice as a token of apology and returned to the room.

Matsuoka was staring absently out the window in a long-sleeve shirt and jeans.

"Oh. Welcome back." The blush had receded from his face, and his expression had returned back to normal.

"Sorry about that back there... this is for you." When Hirosue offered him the juice, Matsuoka smiled wryly.

"I should be sorry for saying strange stuff like that."

No, no, I should be sorry. No really, I should be—they continued to apologize to each other until they both realized how strange it was, and they caught each other's eye and dissolved into laughter. Hirosue was relieved; he had feared spending the whole day together until tomorrow in awkwardness, but everything seemed fine now.

"Oh, I ran into the parlourmaid on the way back from the bath, and she told me there's a lookout point a short climb up the mountain behind this place. Apparently the view is really nice. Want to go for a hike?"

Since they had no other plans, Hirosue agreed to Matsuoka's invitation and trailed behind him. The parlourmaid had called it a short climb, but the slope was steep and the path was quite long. The trail was also only wide enough for one man—it was an animal trail of sorts. The mountain trail seemed to pose no challenge to Matsuoka, who walked extensively outside on a daily basis as a part of his work. He pressed on ahead with enthusiasm. But Hirosue, who mainly did seat work, was out of breath in minutes.

"Short break?" Matsuoka suggested.

Hirosue nodded without a split second of hesitation. They sat down on the path. The mountains were misty in the distance.

"Pretty steep slope, isn't it?" Matsuoka commented, though he looked unfazed.

"I think I need to put on some muscle," Hirosue admitted. Matsuoka had a five year advantage over him in age, but that didn't make his lack of strength any less embarrassing.

"Actually, I have a friend who started going to a gym to put on some muscle, and he got pretty buff in a month. You could see the difference."

"A gym, huh," Hirosue echoed.

"Want to start going together? I'll look out for some good places. Maybe a location we can drop in on the way home from work."

Hirosue admitted he was interested. A gym was intimidating to go to alone, but he'd feel reassured if Matsuoka were to come with him. If he was still working, it wouldn't have been a problem, but he wasn't keen on joining a gym when he was unemployed. There was the risk that he would run out of money for monthly membership payments.

"I think I'll pass on the gym after all."

"Oh," Matsuoka said. For a split second, he looked crestfallen, but he grinned and said, "If you ever feel like it again, let me know."

Something fluttered down from above. Hirosue looked up at the sky. It was snow. The signs were there: it had been cold, and he had noticed the thick grey clouds covering the sky. But he hadn't expected it to actually snow when they were well into March.

The snow drifted straight downwards in the absence of a breeze. Matsuoka turned his face up and opened his mouth wide. He clamped it shut, then opened it again. A long, long time ago, Hirosue had done the same thing as a boy in primary school, unable to contain his joy at the falling snow.

Matsuoka's usually so mature and proper. I guess he has a childish side, too, Hirosue thought as he gazed at the man's profile making the same repeated motions.

"Does snow taste good?"

Matsuoka's cheeks suddenly flushed as he closed his mouth.

"It doesn't taste like anything. It's just cold."

Hirosue imitated him and tried a taste of the snow. Before he could even detect it on his tongue, the fizzy sensation disappeared.

"—You look like a carp in a pond waiting for food. It looks pretty idiotic," Matsuoka murmured.

"You started doing the carp thing," Hirosue retorted.

"Well, yeah. But you know what they say. Learn wisdom by the folly of others—something like that."

"You're one to talk, Head Honcho Carp."

Matsuoka narrowed his eyes and laughed.

"It looks like it's gonna get colder, so let's hurry and climb the rest," he said, pointing up the path.

After their break, they resumed climbing at a brisk pace for a while, but Hirosue began to tire

partway through, just as he expected. He was climbing with his back bent when a right hand was silently extended in front of him. Matsuoka was offering to pull him along by the hand.

"It's okay. We only have a little bit more to go," Hirosue said.

"I'll make things fair and take a handicap for our five-year age difference."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hirosue said indignantly.

Hirosue was unsure of what to do, but since Matsuoka was being cheeky by talking about age difference and handicaps, he decided to take the man's hand to make things difficult for him. Although Matsuoka's hand was smaller than his, the man himself was strong; he yanked Hirosue along powerfully. Contrary to Hirosue's initial intent, he ended up depending on Matusoka's help a great deal until they reached the lookout point.

They emerged upon a stretch of land that was flat and spacious despite its elevated area in the mountains. It had space enough for two houses, and perhaps there had actually been houses there, for there were large stones on the ground that looked like crumbled foundations.

The scenery below was worth the effort they had made to climb up the steep slope. In the distance, the mountains lay covered in mist, enveloping the valleys below. Occasional patches of young, tender green were already visible in the mountains, bringing with them the reminders of spring. It felt strange to see the snow fall on such a scene.

Hirosue absently gazed at the stunning scenery. He could feel trembling—Matsuoka's trembling—through their linked fingers. That was when he finally noticed they were still holding hands from climbing up the mountain.

"Are you cold?"

"Oh. No. Just getting a thrill."

"Really, now," Hirosue said jokingly. "Want to borrow my coat?"

"Oh, no. I'm fine. Besides, you'll be cold without it."

Matsuoka's hand left his as he hugged his shoulders. Hirosue couldn't stand watching the man's shivering frame—so slender compared to his own—so he took off his coat and draped it over Matsuoka's back.

"It's chilly out here. Want to start heading back?" he asked.

Matsuoka nodded silently, still wearing Hirosue's coat over his shoulders. Walking downhill was easier, so Hirosue walked ahead.

"I think I'm going to take a bath again when we get back," Hirosue said, his breath coming out in a puff of white.

"Me, too. I didn't get to try the outdoor bath last time."

Remembering their awkward interaction in the bath, Hirosue spoke up first. "You should go first this time, Matsuoka. I'll go in afterwards." There was no answer from Matsuoka, and Hirosue assumed his silence meant he agreed. That was when he heard a voice speak up behind him.

"I don't mind going together."

Hirosue turned around. His feet stopped. Matsuoka also stopped.

"But back there—"

"I actually did get dizzy from being in the water too long. If you're fine with it, Hirosue, so am I. Besides, you probably want to take a bath right away after we get back, don't you?"

"Uh... yeah."

I thought he didn't like being seen naked, Hirosue thought, *but if he's okay with bathing together, maybe he doesn't mind all too much*. The more he thought, the less sense he could make of it. What was going on inside Matsuoka's mind? How did he feel about it?

On second thought, there was no big deal about two men bathing together. Hirosue had felt none of the repulsion he had feared upon seeing Matsuoka's naked body. He had only thought the man was very thin. Besides, if you thought about it, Matsuoka's body was the same as his; they had the same parts. There was nothing to feel repulsed about.

"I wonder if we can bring a *sake* bottle into the bath," Hirosue suddenly murmured.

"What? Are you serious?" Matsuoka said, his eyes wide.

"Why not? Snow-gazing over *sake* in an open-air bath—it would be the best. Let's do it."

"Am I part of this, too?"

"It'd be no fun by myself, would it?"

"Oh, fine," Matsuoka grumbled. "We're probably not allowed unless it's a private bath, but let's try asking," he said nevertheless, hunching his shoulders.

Alcohol was not allowed to be brought into the outdoor bath, they were told. But even without *sake*, there was nothing quite like bathing outdoors during snowfall. Hirosue and Matsuoka warmed their bodies frozen from the hike while they chatted endlessly about trivial things. Evening darkened to night while they soaked in the outdoor bath, and their hands and feet turned shrivelled like those of old men.

Their dinner was luxurious, and Hirosue could see why Matsuoka had been enthusiastic to give it a try. The delicious food encouraged them to drink more. If he got drunk, he only had to go to the next room to sleep; the reassurance made Hirosue drink *sake* as well as beer. The drink warmed him until he felt hot, and against the better advice of Matsuoka, he opened the window and snow-gazed while drinking *sake*, fancying himself doing what they hadn't been able to do in the outdoor bath. Not even five minutes later, he began shivering from the cold.

"I told you so," Matsuoka had said, laughing at him.

He found enjoyment in every little thing. Hirosue was heartily glad that he had come on this trip. Although he had gone on the occasional spontaneous trip by himself, this was his first time going away with someone else, apart from school or company trips. He hadn't imagined that a trip with someone else could be so fun—no matter if all they had done was merely soak endlessly in the bath and climb endlessly up a mountain path.

They ate and drank until they were full to bursting, and moved to the next room to sleep. Their futons were laid out neatly for them, and when Hirosue slid into his, it enveloped his whole body with warm comfort.

Matsuoka turned on the paper lantern stand and turned off the room lights.

"Oh, are you going to sleep? Want me to turn this off, too?"

"You can keep it on," Hirosue said, seeing Matsuoka reach towards the light switch. He was sleepy, but not sleepy. He still wanted to stay up and talk.

"Thanks for everything today," he said.

"What's this, all of a sudden?" Matsuoka turned his face towards him, hugging his pillow in the next futon over.

"Reserving the inn and stuff. And you drove the whole way here."

"I enjoy driving."

Hirosue rolled over and looked up at the wood-panel ceiling. His house back in the country also had a wood-panelled ceiling which was stained in some places. When he was younger, the stains used to frighten him because they looked ghosts, and he would pull his futon over his head when he went to sleep. It was funny when he thought about it now.

"Hirosue."

He turned his head to see Matsuoka gazing at him solemnly.

"Are you having fun?"

"You mean the trip?"

Matsuoka nodded on his side.

"How about you, Matsuoka?"

After a slight pause, Matsuoka said, "I'm having fun."

"Then, I'll say I'm having *lots* of fun."

"Then, I'm having *lots and lots* of fun," Matsuoka fought back.

"You're acting like a kid," Hirosue teased, and Matsuoka flushed beneath his eyes and buried his face into his pillow. After spending a lot of time with this man, Hirosue came to realize something. Matsuoka had an unusually childish side to him, one you could never imagine from how he looked in his suit.

"But it's true that I'm having fun," Matsuoka mumbled. Their conversation lapsed after his last utterance. It was quiet inside the room, but not in the awkward way. Hirosue's heart was warm with the afterglow of enjoyment. But once this trip was over, reality was waiting for him. He would have to face a staggering load of work and the reality of leaving work at the end of March. As for the quitting part, there was not much to face; he had more or less resigned himself to his fate. The problem now was that he didn't have a new job yet.

The job search took the biggest toll on him—mentally, more than physically. When refusals came in succession, they depressed his spirits further and convinced him that he was truly worthless. *If I was going to be rejected anyway, he would think, I shouldn't have submitted my CV in the first place. I shouldn't have gone in for an interview at all.* But he knew things didn't quite work like that.

"Maybe I'll go back to the country," he muttered to the wood-panelled ceiling.

"Go back? Like, during the holidays?" said a voice beside him. Matsuoka was still awake.

"No, not like that. I meant maybe I should just go back to the country for good."

Matsuoka fell silent.

"I'm just kidding, though," Hirosue added. He could not go back. There were no jobs back home, realistically speaking. And he was not going to fall back under the care of his parents at this age.

"Is your hometown far away, Hirosue?"

"It's in an inconvenient place, so it takes two hours by bullet train from Tokyo, then about forty

minutes on the local line."

"It's a town on the harbour, right?"

"Yeah. Their seafood is great. My family back home runs a business that handles processed fish products. My parents are still doing well, but my older brother and his wife have taken over the business from them."

"I'd like to go there once."

"Sure, but there's nothing to see. —Your hometown is in Tokyo, right?"

"In the suburbs."

"Do you ever go back home?"

"Not really. My younger brother just got married last year and they're living at home. I only go back during Obon and the new year."

Hirosue's consciousness gradually faded while they talked, and before he knew it, it was morning. They took a morning bath and ate a luxurious breakfast fit for kings. After checking out, they took a leisurely stroll around the area of the inn before heading home.

Hirosue enjoyed his trip so much, he would give it full points. Matsuoka was a lot less talkative on the way home, but Hirosue figured he was tired from driving by himself, and did not try to force a conversation with him.

Starting the day after returning from his hot springs trip, Hirosue was once again swallowed up into the current of busy work. Overtime until nine or ten o'clock became the norm, and he and Hayama became more like comrades in battle rather than co-workers.

One such afternoon, the office received a very agitated phone call from the head clerk's wife. Apparently she had misunderstood his consecutive late nights of overtime as an affair. It didn't make things any better that Hayama had been the one to answer the phone first. Even for an outsider, it was pitiful to watch the head clerk cup his hand around the mouthpiece of the phone as he hunched his back and desperately explained himself.

"My family is falling apart..." whispered the head clerk, and he seemed to mean it. The girl who had broken her hip was unable to come to work for the entire month of April. The other worker on sick leave was returning in mid-April. Hayama, who was helping Hirosue, would be quitting at the end of March. The head clerk, sensing danger in their operations from April onwards, had negotiated with Human Resources directly to have Hirosue's layoff postponed, even for a month. He did not receive a good answer; instead, he was told to make do with the new workers coming in April.

"I personally would have wanted you to stay." Before lunch, the head clerk had called him out and told him so in a corner of the room. Hirosue was very grateful for his consideration. But the expectation that he might possibly be able to stay made the disappointment bigger.

That day on lunch break, he and Hayama ate their lunches in the courtyard of the laboratory. Since there was no convenience store nearby, they always ordered delivery *bento* for lunch. Hayama used to bring her own lunches at the outset, but with consecutive days of overtime, it seemed she no longer had the time. These days, she also ordered delivery *bento* like Hirosue.

"Can I ask you something?" Hayama said gravely, as Hirosue was taking a draught of tea from

a bottle.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Hirosue, are you quitting the company?"

Today was March 15, still ten days away from the official announcement. He could have lied to cover it up, but since Hayama was tight-lipped, he felt like it would be alright. In a department of three people, there was no way the information would leak outside.

"Yeah, I am. But who did you hear that from?"

Hayama awkwardly ducked her head. "I heard the head clerk talking to HR at headquarters over the phone. —Are you starting at some other job?"

Hirosue smiled wryly. "That would have been nice. But no, in my case, it means they don't have a use for me anymore." He figured that was enough to get across that this was a layoff against his will. Hayama was silent for a while before she spoke.

"There's also someone in sales who's being laid off, and he's in his thirties," she said quietly.

"Huh?" Hirosue asked in surprise.

"I've heard similar stories from other departments. The target is supposed to be people in their fifties, but apparently the thirties range have gotten the same orders. Thirties—in any department, that's the age group that's at the centre of things, you know? So it seems like everyone's at a loss of what to do. I really have no idea what our company's thinking. Even here—they know they're going to be in trouble if you leave in this situation."

Hirosue felt a little relieved to know he was not the only one in his thirties to get laid off. He felt like perhaps it wasn't just a matter of his ability that caused him to lose his job. Nonetheless, if he had been a man like Matsuoka, who was revered and respected by those around him, he would probably not have had to quit.

"Have you found your next job?"

Hirosue shrugged. "I've been looking, but I don't have any qualifications, and my age makes it hard to land a job. Amidst all that, things got busy over here and I haven't had the time to search. I could start job searching again once I quit, or... I think I might even go back to the countryside."

Now that he put it into words, he really felt like going back home was an option. He did not have much of an attachment to life here, anyway.

"Your hometown is pretty far from here, isn't it?"

"About three hours by bullet train and local line, I think."

"Then, what are you going to do about the girl you like? Are you going to take her home with you?"

When Hayama mentioned the "girl he liked", the first thing that came to his mind was Matsuoka's face. Going home to the countryside meant he would also not be able to see Matsuoka as frequently as he did now. Although he did feel a degree of loneliness at the thought, it wasn't enough to tip his decision of whether he should go back to the countryside or not.

This was his life.

"I wonder what I should do," Hirosue muttered. Whether it was to Hayama or himself, he did not know.

It was widely said that spring was coming late this year, and just a week ago they had seen snow on the hot springs trip. For a while, Hirosue remained under the impression that it was still winter. But the temperature soared once they passed the twentieth of March; winter coats soon became a bulky and unfashionable sight.

About two days before the official announcement of his layoff, Hirosue got a call from Matsuoka during overtime.

"Can I see you today?" he said. They had both been busy with work and overtime after returning from their hot springs trip. Although they still e-mailed each other, they had not had a chance to eat together yet.

"I'm fine, but are you, Matsuoka?" Just yesterday, Hayama had returned from headquarters to tell him that Sales was in utter chaos. The core of the sales department was losing a quarter of its staff, and the succession of duties was not going well. The department was upside-down with confusion.

Being originally from headquarters, Hayama had gone back for two days this week to sort out their administrative work. With Hayama now coming in only every other day, they were neck-deep with no way out. The head clerk had negotiated directly with Human Resources, and they had sent a contract worker to fill in starting this week. The woman was an expert, and although she worked only from nine to five with no overtime whatsoever, she got as much work done as two people. Thanks to her, Hirosue had been able to finish work at around seven these past days.

"I'm fine. So, can I see you?" He had never heard Matsuoka sound so tense. Perhaps he was stressed out from being busy at work and wanted to go for drinks to let off some steam. Since Hirosue was almost finished with his own work, he promised to meet the man around eight and hung up.

Matsuoka always invited him to dinner by e-mail and never called Hirosue during work hours, even during overtime. But Hirosue simply brushed off the change. *Everyone has times like that, I guess*, he thought, and made nothing of it.

After they met up at the station, on Matsuoka's request they went to a cozy *izakaya* with private booths instead of their usual place. "Just to change things up," Matsuoka had said, and Hirosue did not doubt his words. The menu was varied with numerous unusual dishes, but Hirosue felt like the food at their usual *izayaka* was better.

Matsuoka did not make a single complaint about work. When Hirosue asked if things were busy for him, he only said that it was like that all the time, and the topic went no further. Yet Matsuoka still appeared restless, constantly checking his watch and fidgeting.

"Hirosue, are you interested in law at all?" Matsuoka asked out of the blue, just as Hirosue was wondering about his peculiar attitude.

"What's this all of a sudden?" he asked back, but Matsuoka was strangely vague.

"Er," he said uncertainly.

"Are you in some kind of trouble that has to do with the law?"

"No, not really, but..."

This was not the usual Matsuoka who was outspoken and clear-cut. Even though he had started the topic, the man kept his face slightly down and didn't even try to look at Hirosue. Perhaps it was something difficult to speak about. Hirosue turned his thoughts over in his head for a little while.

"I don't know any lawyers personally, but if you can wait, do you want me to ask my relatives if they know anyone?"

"Oh—I didn't mean I wanted you to introduce me to a lawyer."

Hirosue had been almost positive about his guess. Now, he had no idea what Matsuoka was trying to say. In the space of their silence, a cell phone started to ring. Matsuoka opened it, checked the caller, and lightly clicked his tongue.

"Excuse me for a bit," he said, and left their booth. Hirosue was left alone with nothing to do, so he drank as he nibbled at the food. Matsuoka came back about ten minutes later, but he was even more restless than before.

"Who called?" Hirosue asked, wondering if he was prying too much.

"One of my juniors from work," Matsuoka answered. "He made a mistake and he's cleaning up the mess. We've been having a lot of those kinds of problems lately. It looks like I'll have to go back to the office after this, too."

"I guess we'll wrap up after we eat, then?"

"Sorry for doing this to you after dragging you out here," Matsuoka apologized. "But I wanted to see you today, no matter what. My senior told me to give him an answer by tomorrow, so—"

"Your senior?"

"Oh—" Matsuoka blurted softly, then lowered his face. As Hirosue sat confused and uncomprehending, Matsuoka looked up again decisively. "A former upperclassman of mine at university is a lawyer, and he's going to be opening his own law firm."

"Wow, that's good for him. He must be really capable."

Perhaps Matsuoka was involved in some kind of dispute after all. *But if he already knows a lawyer, why does he need to come to me about it?* Hirosue thought, but then again, perhaps it was a matter that was awkward to discuss with an acquaintance.

"That's why he's looking for someone to do administrative work and reception when he opens his firm. He said the candidate wouldn't need any specialized knowledge or qualifications for now, but he did say he'd want them to learn a couple things."

Hirosue felt the underside of his heart bristle unpleasantly. Where was this discussion going?

"The other day, Hayama came back to headquarters, and... the topic turned to you, and I heard you were going through a hard time."

Matsuoka had phrased it vaguely as a "hard time", but there was no doubt he had heard from Hayama about the unofficial announcement of his layoff. Two days from now, his name would have gone up on the list of resigning employees on the bulletin at headquarters. Hirosue was prepared to face it when Matsuoka found out through the bulletin—that, at least, was inevitable. But this—

"There's a guy from my department who quit, too. He's a year younger than you," Matsuoka said. "He got really fed up with the way things were being done at the company. It took him two seconds to slap his resignation slip in their faces and transfer to another company."

So it seemed that the Sales worker was nimble enough to find a post at another company after getting laid off. He was different—completely different—from Hirosue, who had gone to interview after interview only to be rejected.

"I heard from Hayama that you were looking for a new job, and I wanted to help somehow,"

Matsuoka explained. "I contacted some friends from university, and that was when my senior suggested his place. But he told me he wants an answer by tomorrow. I know that it might not be my place to say this, since you haven't mentioned anything to me, but my senior's really friendly and he's a good guy. It's administrative work, but it's full-time. The salary might not be as high as our company, but I don't think the conditions are too bad."

Matsuoka's concern for his layoff was probably genuine. Although it was a fortunate offer, the more Hirose listened to it, the more he began to lose sympathy. Not only that, a feeling of irritation began to mount within him.

Hirose balled his hands into fists under the table.

"I noticed you seemed kind of down since last month, and it was bothering me," Matsuoka continued. "And the other day, when you mentioned going back to the countryside... I wondered if something had happened. When I heard the news from Hayama, I finally knew what it was about, so..."

It was true that he had been depressed since receiving news of his layoff. He had compared himself to Matsuoka, who was a capable man, and wallowed in his share of self-pity. But that was his own responsibility, and it was his problem. He didn't want to be told what to do. He didn't want people to poke and pry. Although he was hard-pressed to find his next job, he hadn't asked Matsuoka to do him any favours. He hadn't even mentioned a word of it to the man.

No amount of interviews had been able to secure Hirose a new post. But with Matsuoka's power, he would be given a job with good conditions. The sum of all his efforts paled in the face of Matsuoka's social network.

I can find my own job. Just leave me alone. Don't rub our difference in my face. It might take time, but I'll do it on my own. I'm not a child. I can take care of myself. He was angry and frustrated. But when he wondered if his frustrations stemmed from his own twisted and negative views of himself, his anger turned to sadness.

Why did Matsuoka take the pains to do things for him? Was it out of sympathy? Or pity? Hirose was overcome with a sudden nausea, along with a wrenching in his gut. He didn't want to see Matsuoka's face, or hear his voice, or be near him anymore.

Hirose took his wallet out of his bag and placed a few thousand yen on the table.

"I'm not feeling well. I'm going home." He stood up without waiting for an answer.

"Huh? Are you alright?" Matsuoka scrambled out of his seat.

"Matsuoka, you should stay and eat. You've barely touched any of the food."

"Yeah, but—hey, wait. Wait up. I'm coming. I'm coming, too!"

Hirose left the restaurant and walked briskly without waiting for Matsuoka to finish paying the bill. He wished the man wouldn't follow him, but he heard hurried footsteps chasing after him.

"Hirose!"

On the deserted sidewalk, he was pulled back by the arm. Just his touch was enough to make Hirose bristle, and he violently shook the man off. Matsuoka looked like he was about to cry.

"I—I'm sorry."

"For what?" The coldness of his own voice surprised him.

"I went and I... did something that was completely uncalled for." Matsuoka's head was bowed

and he was trembling. *So you're aware of what you did*, Hirosue wanted to say, but he didn't. He felt like putting it into words would just make him feel even more detestable.

"You were just concerned for me, right, Matsuoka? Thanks for the job offer, but I've already decided to go back to my hometown after I quit."

It had only been one of his options, but he spoke of it as if it were set in stone. Matsuoka's eyes flew wide open.

"What...?" he said softly.

"I have to make arrangements to move out of my apartment, so I'm going to get busy. I don't think I'll be able to see you like I used to."

"But last time you said you still—" Matsuoka began, but Hirosue interrupted him.

"Bye, then," he said shortly, and got into a taxi. The trains were still running at this time, but he felt if he walked to the station, Matsuoka would come after him.

He vacantly watched the scenery slip past him out the window. Soon, unable to stand it anymore, he cradled his head in his hands. *Enough, enough, enough, enough....* He had had enough of everything—of his immature, miserable self, and of meddlesome Matsuoka.

"Sir, are you feeling ill?" The driver sounded more concerned about his car being soiled than about how Hirosue was feeling. Hirosue said nothing as he lifted his face and shifted his gaze once more out the window. He wasn't looking at the scenery. He was remembering, over and over, about their conversation at the restaurant. With each recollection, the black fog in his head grew thicker and thicker until it filled every corner of mind—until he could think of nothing else.

He heard the ringtone for an incoming e-mail. It was from Matsuoka.

I'm really sorry for what I said today. It was thoughtless of me. But—'

The e-mail went on for much longer, but Hirosue turned off his cell phone without reading the rest.

Although the option of going back home had always been in Hirosue's mind, the prospects of re-employment always made him hesitate. But now that he had said it out loud, the fact began to take solid, realistic shape within him. Perhaps it wouldn't hurt to go back to the countryside—to take up a job completely unrelated to administration rather than endure the unpleasantness of remaining here.

The moment he made the decision to go back, Hirosue found his heart feeling lighter. That was when he realized for the first time that he had neither truly sought a life in the city nor a new career.

Now that he was going back to the country, he had to choose whether to go back to his parents' home or rent an apartment. But before that, he had to explain to his family why things had turned out this way. He deliberated whom to tell first, and decided to tell his older brother.

Hirosue told his brother that he had been laid off from his company, was sick of work, and wanted to go back to the countryside. His brother was silent for a moment before answering.

"Alright," he said in firm solidarity. "Come home and relax, for a month or two, or as long as you need to. But there's no need to move completely out of your apartment, is there? Don't you need to find your next job over there?"

"I'm thinking of looking for a job out in the country."

"You won't find any good jobs here. Mom and Dad are still working at our factory. To be honest, we're in need of help since my wife just gave birth and the baby's been a handful, but we're not well-off enough to give you a salary."

Reality was not so forgiving.

"Look for your new job over there," his brother said. "As long as you're not picky, there are a lot more options than the countryside."

Although that was his brother's argument, Hirosue was starting to feel an overwhelming weariness towards his unsuccessful job search and his mundane life of going back and forth between the office and his apartment. Even if he were to return to the city to search for a job, he wanted to start with a clean slate—that was the argument he used to convince his reluctant brother as he made the decision to move out of his apartment after all.

His brother told him he would tell their parents that he had quit because he was exhausted from being so busy at work. By not mentioning the layoff, he was allowing his little brother to save face. It was his way of being considerate, which made Hirosue feel both guilty and saddened.

On top of his work, Hirosue was now suddenly busy with contacting his landlord, arranging for a moving company, disposing of unneeded belongings, and getting his things together.

He received e-mails from Matsuoka every day. 'Whenever you're free—it doesn't matter what time—please let me know. I want to talk to you,' it said each time. Hirosue's answer was always, 'I'm sorry, I'm busy,' and he did not make time to see the man.

His feeling towards Matsuoka were mixed and hard to put into words. He knew Matsuoka had only meant good, but the gesture was something Hirosue hadn't asked for. Yet, he admitted his attitude towards the man who was concerned for him was inexcusably immature.

All in all, this incident had not caused him to hate Matsuoka; he just did not want to see him. He couldn't stand the sense of inferiority he felt before Matsuoka. Once he had come to terms with the reality of getting laid off, he had managed to go back to having a regular relationship with the man, but being introduced to a job opportunity had made those feelings flare up again. He only had to give it some time until they calmed down. He would not see Matsuoka until then. He did not want to become the kind of miserable man he hated in front of Matsuoka.

The last day of this fiscal year fell on the last weekend of March. Hirosue's last day at the office fell on March 29. Three days ago, he had already gone to a slightly contradictory farewell party which consisted of more people leaving the company than staying behind. Since Hayama was scheduled to work at headquarters on his last day, she and Hirosue had said their farewells on the day before.

On the 29th, Hirosue got off work at a regular hour, received a superficial bouquet of flowers and went home to his apartment. It was empty inside, with only a few cardboard boxes packed with his belongings.

His things were scheduled to be moved out tomorrow. This would formally end his tenancy, and would return to the country on the last train.

Hirosue ate a *bento* from the convenience store in his barren room. When he thought of how he would truly be unemployed starting from tomorrow, he felt an indescribable sense of anxiety. Perhaps he would go on to be a complete deadbeat; perhaps he would never find a new job—he kept thinking of bad things.

He nursed a beer that he had bought with his *bento* as he stared absently at the wall. Never did he feel more glad that he had decided to go back home. He could not stand imagining all the lonely nights he would have to spend like this until he found his next job.

I probably won't be able to sleep tonight, he thought, when he heard his cell phone ring. It was from Matsuoka. Hirosue debated whether to answer it or not. The phone rang incessantly. He didn't want to see the man just yet. But if he was going back to the country, he wouldn't be able to see Matsuoka for a while. Perhaps he should at least say farewell. That was his reason for picking up the phone.

"Hirosue." Matsuoka's voice was trembling. "Thank God... thank God you answered the phone. I want to see you right now. I *need* to see you."

He was not asking for permission. He had clearly stated that he wanted to meet. Hirosue did not mind talking over the phone, but he did not want to talk face-to-face.

"I'm pretty tired out, so... sorry."

"Please. If you don't want to come out, I'll go to your place. Five minutes is enough."

The man's voice sounded so desperate, Hirosue felt sorry for him. Since he didn't want to let the conversation drag out by inviting the man over, he agreed instead to meet Matsuoka near a park close to his apartment, and went on to set a time.

When he arrived at the park ten minutes before their agreed time, a figure sitting on the bench right beside the street lamp moved. Matsuoka was wearing a dark grey suit and a thin coat of a light colour. He looked like he was on his way home from work, for his bag was bulging.

Hirosue had been too lazy to change, so he had thrown a tracksuit top over his shirt.

"I'm sorry for making you come out when you're tired." Matsuoka's nose was a little red. "I have to work on Saturday and Sunday, so I figured today was the only day I could see you."

"You have to work during the fiscal year-end break?"

"I have to prep for training new recruits," Matsuoka mumbled hesitantly. His promotion had apparently brought with it a lot more miscellaneous tasks to do on top of his regular work. Even though Hirosue knew it had nothing to do with him anymore, he still felt a grey fog roll into his heart.

"I heard from Hayama that you were going back to your hometown sometime in March. Is that true?"

"...Yeah."

Matsuoka's tense lips twitched.

"If you're going back, that means you're moving out of your apartment, right?"

"That would be right."

Matsuoka lowered his face and emitted a long, thin sigh.

"Tell me your address back home."

A short silence. A dog was barking in the distance.

"What good would it do to know?" Hirosue said.

The man's lips looked pale, perhaps because of the dim street lamp. His mouth was pulled into a thin line.

"I'll visit you when I have the time."

"But it's far."

"It's two hours by bullet train and forty minutes by local line, right? I can still manage a day trip." Matsuoka sounded casual, but Hirosue felt like he was only putting on an act.

"You don't have to go through the trouble."

"I'll have to, won't I, if I want to see you!" Matsuoka raised his voice, then covered his mouth as if he were surprised to hear himself. He narrowed his eyes painfully. "I'm sorry for yelling. It's no trouble for me. Really. It's not like you're going overseas, and I just have to get on a bullet train to see you. So it's fine."

If he told Matsuoka his address, the man would probably come to visit him. He was going to the countryside to forget about this place; if Matsuoka came, it would defeat the purpose. Hirosue was willing to see the man once he had sorted out his feelings. But not yet.

Hirosue did not give an answer. Since he didn't want to say anything, only silence wore on without meaning.

"—You won't tell me," Matsuoka said.

"I'm sorry," was the best Hirosue could manage to say.

"What am I to you, Hirosue?" Matsuoka asked, his gaze earnest and his question desperate. Hirosue swallowed hard.

"You told me before, Hirosue, remember? You asked me to wait until you were sure of your feelings. And I've been waiting. But how much longer do I have to wait? When are you going to give me a proper answer?"

He had left things vague, and the consequences were coming back to him now. Back then, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about Matsuoka, and he had thought it was because he had romantic feelings for him. So he had held the man back so he could make sure. Even after the answer became clear, he had kept putting off telling Matsuoka because he had wanted their lukewarm friendship to continue. But if Matsuoka wanted an answer, perhaps now was the time to be frank about it.

"Matsuoka, to me—"

"Never mind," a trembling voice interrupted. "You don't have to say it."

Hirosue had a feeling that Matsuoka already knew. He was sure the man knew what he was about to say. That was why he had said there was no need. Hirosue turned over his thoughts. He wanted to keep being friends with Matsuoka. But if he dragged this relationship on and kept Matsuoka's hopes up, he would prevent the man from finding anyone new.

"Matsuoka, I asked you to wait because I wasn't sure about my feelings. —I thought about it after that, and in the end, I can only think of you as... um, a friend."

Matsuoka's stiff cheek twitched. Hirosue continued to speak as if to justify himself.

"It's not that I hate you. I enjoy spending time with you. But it's different from how I would see someone romantically, and..."

"Sorry," Matsuoka mumbled quietly. "I got really ahead of myself. I heard you were moving in March, and when I realized if you changed your cell number I wouldn't even be able to get in touch, my mind just went blank, and... I... yeah, I'm used to waiting. I can wait for as long as it takes..."

"I can't be your lover, Matsuoka. All the time you spend waiting is only going to be a waste."

"What the hell do you mean, a waste?" Matsuoka's voice suddenly turned harsh.

"What I'm saying is..."

"Are you saying I don't even have a chance?" he demanded angrily. Hirosue fell silent at his oppressive question.

"Tell me what's wrong," Matsuoka pressed. "I'll fix it. If you find it annoying to get e-mails every day, I'll e-mail you less. We can even just meet once a month. I'll go with your pace, Hirosue." Numerous compromises. His voice, almost like a cry of pain, racked Hirosue's heart.

"It's not about how many e-mails you send or how many times we meet."

"Then tell me what's wrong."

"It's on a more... fundamental level..." Hirosue trailed off. It was difficult to bring up a reason that no amount of effort could fix. The silence wore on, and Hirosue felt like he was standing on a bed of needles.

"...Is it..." Matsuoka's lips moved. "...because I'm a man?" The uttered words lingered in the air. When Hirosue nodded slightly, Matsuoka's face contorted harshly.

"But you knew that already! I wasn't crossdressed anymore when you asked me to wait for your answer!"

It was painful for Hirosue to be criticized about that. Before, he had told Matsuoka, who had been in woman's guise, that he would fall in love with him no matter what form he took. He had meant it at the time; however, he had not been able to love Matsuoka as a man. And he had truthfully told him so.

When he had held Matsuoka back, he had thought his preoccupation with him came from love, and that he would maybe be able to love him even though he was a man. But just as he had thought, he could not. There was nothing he could do about it. After all that he had made Matsuoka expect, he was going to reject him with the same reason again.

"I thought I wouldn't mind if you were a man. But when it came down to it... just physically, I couldn't..."

Matsuoka pressed his right hand against his chest. "If you're saying you can't be with me because I'm a man, should I start crossdressing again? If I put on makeup, wear skirts, just like I used to..."

"But that won't change the fact that you're a man."

"Then what the hell am I supposed to do?!" Matsuoka yelled.

Hirosue averted his gaze from Matsuoka's. He could not look the man in the eye.

"I don't think there is anything you can do. —I don't think anything can be done."

Matsuoka's knees gave out as he crumpled to the ground on the spot. All the life left his face as he hung his head deeply. His curled back was such a painful sight to see that Hirosue could not help but say something to him.

"I wasn't lying. I really did think I would be able to love you. —But even though I can't, I still care about you a lot, Matsuoka. If I could, I'd want to keep being friends with you."

Matsuoka was silent for a long while as he hung his head.

"...I can't be friends." When he finally spoke, his voice was weak. "Maybe to you, we were just a couple of friends going out for dinner or going away somewhere, but for me, the whole time I felt like I was going on a date. Even if we were only seeing each other for a bit in the evening, I'd wear a nice suit that day. I would have wanted to see you every day, but I thought you'd get annoyed, so I

held back. I know you never told me you loved me, or that you wanted to date me, but it felt like you'd already said so."

"I'm sorry."

"I did have a feeling that—maybe I wasn't good enough. Maybe it wouldn't work because I'm a man. But I still thought maybe one day things would take a turn for the better, and..."

Matsuoka's voice shook and tapered off.

"I don't want to be friends. If we're friends, I'd have to congratulate you when you get a girlfriend or when you get married, right? I'd never want to. I don't even want to see you become someone else's."

What would happen, then, if they could not be friends? Matsuoka got up from his knees to stand on his feet. His eyes were damp and red.

"—You don't have to tell me your address over there." His voice was limp and lifeless. "I won't e-mail or call you anymore."

If they could not be friends, perhaps this was the only choice left to them.

"When you—" Matsuoka's reddened eyes beheld his own steadily. "When you decided to go home to the country, Hirosue, did you ever think about me?"

He was stuck for words. He thought and thought some more about what the right answer would be, but in the end, he was only able to say the truth.

"No."

Matsuoka dropped his gaze and lowered his face.

"I see," he whispered sadly.

"My, if it isn't Motofumi!"

He was on the way home from dropping off a shipment at the commodity centre. He had just bought some cans of *chuhai* from his local supermarket and was mounting his moped when he heard his name being called. Hirosue turned to see Shimizu's mother. Shimizu was his former classmate, and his wedding ceremony was set to take place next next week. Hirosue had been asked to make a speech as the best man.

"It's been a long time, Mrs. Shimizu. And congratulations on your son's marriage."

"Thank you," the woman said with a wide grin. Her amiable face, full of familiarity, was the very picture of a country matron, and filled Hirosue's heart with warm relief.

"So you're back here for good, are you? I'm sure your mother and father feel very lucky to have both of their sons with them. So, Motofumi, aren't you going to get yourself a wife?"

"I haven't really been..." Hirosue trailed off vaguely, scratching his neck.

"You didn't find anyone nice over there?"

When Hirosue smiled wryly in answer, the woman rapped him sharply on the shoulder.

"You're a handsome young man, Motofumi. I'm sure you could find yourself a wife if you looked," she said firmly.

"That's what I hope for."

They stood there and chatted for a bit before parting ways. Back when Hirosue had just arrived

home, every acquaintance he met asked the same cookie-cutter questions about wives and marriage. That settled down after two or three weeks, when he had gone through most of his acquaintances. Still, once in a while when he ran into people he hadn't seen yet, he was asked the same thing yet again.

In the countryside, people got married either early or incredibly late. Hirosue was in the "late" group, along with his classmate, Shimizu. Some of those in the "early" cycle were already into their second marriage. In the city, it was common to see single men in their thirties. Hirosue himself hadn't thought about it much because there was no one to point the fact out to him. But once he was home, he was forced to be conscious about his age, whether he liked it or not.

Hirosue sped along the ocean shore. It was the end of April and the weather was getting warmer, but it was still cold on his moped with the wind blowing at him directly. He wasn't going to let go of his nylon jacket just yet.

The ocean was beautiful, glittering in the soft rays of the afternoon sun. Hirosue stopped his motorcycle partway and sat down on the embankment to absently gaze out at the shining water. Back in the city, surrounded by grey buildings, he had hardly ever stopped to look at the scenery.

Hirosue lingered there for about thirty minutes before returning home. When he arrived at the house, it was past four in the afternoon. His work at the factory started at seven in the morning and ended at three. Afterwards, he went out on deliveries. Since Hirosue could not drive a car, he took the motorcycle, which could only carry so much merchandise. With his load, the best he could manage were nearby retail stores or commodity centres, and so he was always the earliest to get back. Hirosue parked the motorcycle in the garage and entered through the back door of the house into the kitchen. He crouched in front of the fridge and was putting the cans of *chuhai* inside when he felt a heavy *thump* hit him on the back.

"Uncle!"

Hiroki, his brother's first son, dangling off of him. The boy was in second grade, and quite the prankster.

"Hiroki, you're heavy."

"Let's play video games," Hiroki begged.

"Okay, but have you done your homework?"

Honest Hiroki suddenly fell silent.

"I'll play with you if you're done your homework," Hirosue said.

"...I'll do it after we play."

"Hiroki!" Hirosue's sister-in-law said sternly as she came into the kitchen.

"Ahh!" Hiroki cried as he flinched on Hirosue's back.

"Look, you're weighing Uncle Motofumi down. And you are to finish your homework first."

Hiroki pouted. "We're going to play together later. For sure," he whispered in Hirosue's ear. His mother gave a short sigh as she watched her son scurry out of the kitchen.

"I'm sorry, Motofumi. Hiroki's always all over you."

"Don't worry about it. He's cute. I never get bored around him."

His sister-in-law shifted the baby in her arms as it began to fuss. Although she was used to child-rearing since she was onto her third one already, raising an infant seemed to be tiring work all

the same. A piece of frazzled hair had fallen across her cheek.

"After this one was born, I haven't been able to pay much attention to Hiroki," she said. "His little brother, Yuuki, isn't so bad, but Hiroki's been sullen the whole time. I think he must beside himself with joy that you pay attention to him, Motofumi."

"I like kids, so I don't mind. Oh, would you like some tea?"

"I can pour that much myself," his sister-in-law said wryly.

"Don't worry. I'll do it."

Hirosue set out tea for two on the kitchen table.

"Thanks," smiled his sister-in-law. After returning to the country, Hirosue moved back in with his parents. Both his brother and parents had been the ones to suggest it. Hirosue hadn't lived with his family since leaving for Tokyo at eighteen. At first, he had been anxious about how life would be like with his parents, his brother and his wife, and their children. But contrary to his expectations, he fit right into their circle with ease.

When Hirosue moved out of his apartment, he had disposed of a quantity of old furniture and appliances. He had never been attached to material things, so his belongings turned out to be surprisingly few.

The house of his childhood was large, and since his room was still available, that was where he slept and woke now. At first he thought he would have to immediately start looking for a job once he came home. But his sister-in-law was too busy with her baby to go to work at the factory, and as a matter of course, Hirosue began to help out in her place. Although he did not get paid, his family was nice enough. They told him he did not need to pay for food and utilities.

"Hiroki's just like my brother, don't you think?" Hirosue said.

"Really?" his sister-in-law tilted her head, then chuckled. "You mean how they both like to do the fun stuff first and put off the boring stuff until later?"

They looked at each other and laughed. The baby—Hirosue's niece—rocked in his sister-in-law's arms. She was sleeping with her mouth half-open. When Hirosue gently touched her cheek, her little lips made chewing motions.

"She's adorable." A smile tugged at his lips.

"You should get married so you can have kids, too, Motofumi. I'm sure you'd be a good father. I can imagine you smothering your children with love."

"Too bad I don't have anyone to get married to," Hirosue returned in his usual way. His smiling sister-in-law suddenly put on a grave face.

"But you dated people over there, right?"

It was Matsuoka's face that crossed his mind. Although they had never dated as lovers, for some reason, he was the one whom Hirosue remembered.

"I did my fair share of dating. For my age, anyway."

"And you didn't find anyone you'd like to marry?"

Hirosue smiled wryly. "I was dumped by the person I loved most."

Yoko Eto, whom he had loved so much, had disappeared. —But she had turned out to be Matsuoka, so perhaps it was wrong to say 'disappear'. She had transformed? *No, not transform*, Hirosue laughed inwardly. Perhaps all the live-action hero shows he had watched with Hiroki were

influencing him.

"Well, maybe things didn't work out with her, but didn't you find anyone else?"

"I loved her a lot. I couldn't move onto anyone else."

"Everyone has their share of breakups," said his sister-in-law simply. It was a typical phrase, yet for some reason Hirosue felt like he was being put on the spot.

"It doesn't matter how much you love them," his sister-in-law continued, "some people just aren't meant to be together. It's easier just to accept that it's not going to work out."

"I have accepted it. But I just can't forget about her."

Back when he had been in love with Yoko Eto, he had trembled with exhilaration; just being by her side had made him feel strangely fulfilled. In the past and in the future, she had been the only one to stir his emotions in this way.

"How long did you go out for?"

"We were friends at first. We dated for two months, I think."

"That's the stage in a relationship when things are most exciting."

"Exciting?"

"Every relationship has ups and downs. All of them are fun at the outset. Maybe it's harder for you to let go because yours ended at the height of things."

Hirosue felt like someone had taken his special feelings—his own and only his own—and tossed them in the bargain bin. His feelings were nowhere near as superficial as that. He had loved her with all his heart. He wished he could say so, but he couldn't. He didn't want to embarrass himself by being too vehement about it.

"You know, Motofumi, you're soft-spoken, and you have a gentle demeanour. You're kind. That's why it's such a mystery to me why you've been single for this long. If I didn't have Norifumi, I probably would have gotten in line for you. Did I just drop a bomb?" joked his sister-in-law, before laughing and saying, "You were actually really popular with the girls, weren't you? Admit it."

"I'm no good."

Hirosue had only dated a handful of people before, and none of them lasted for more than half a year. More often than not, he was the one to receive a confession; yet, he was always the one being dumped. It was because he was tactless and clumsy at conversation. Matsuoka was about the only person who'd ever called him interesting.

"There was one person—" He did not know why, but he had a strong urge to talk about Matsuoka. "There was one person who told me they loved me a lot. I was really comfortable around them, and we'd go out to eat or spend our free time together a lot. That person told me they loved me, but I couldn't see them in the romantic sense. When I told them how I couldn't be more than friends, they told me they wouldn't see me anymore. They said, if we stayed as friends, they'd have to watch me fall in love with someone else, and they wouldn't be able to stand it."

"I think I understand how she feels," his sister-in-law murmured. "How long did you go out with her for?"

"We met each other two years ago. We only started meeting each other frequently for the past six months or so. But we weren't dating. We were just friends."

"I think I kind of feel sorry for her." His sister-in-law dropped her gaze. "That means for the

first year and a half, that girl had one-sided feelings, right? And just when things were looking good, she had to be told again that there was nothing more to it than being friends. I think that's a pretty harsh blow."

Hirosue remembered the last time they met, and how Matsuoka's eyes had been red and damp.

"I wanted to fall in love, but..."

"You should have just married her to try it out. Things might have turned out better than you think."

"Huh?" Hirosue exclaimed in surprise.

"If you're going to live with someone, it needs to be someone you're comfortable with rather than someone you love. When you're in love, you're busy flaring up and cooling down, and that's not going to work if you're living together. Compatibility is very important. Even if you love each other, if you're incompatible, it's always going to end badly."

Hirosue suddenly felt extremely uncomfortable in his seat and shifted his bottom slightly. *Would you say the same thing if you found out I was talking about a man?* he thought derisively, then instantly felt disgusted with himself.

"With that person that I loved most, I thought of marriage, getting a house, having kids... but I just couldn't imagine a life like that together."

"You couldn't imagine a domestic life? Was she that flashy?"

Matsuoka was trim and good-looking, but he was definitely not flashy.

"I finished my homework!" Hiroki came bursting into the kitchen. "This way, this way," he said, yanking at Hirosue's hand. It was dubious whether he had really done his homework in this short amount of time, but since a promise was a promise, Hirosue smiled wryly and followed after his nephew. While he played video games with Hiroki, he thought about Matsuoka.

He felt like he would never meet a person who would confess his love as devotedly as Matsuoka did. If Matsuoka had been a woman, there would have been no problem. Matsuoka was comfortable to be around, and he was someone who cared about him. Matsuoka loved and cherished him. Perhaps he would have ended up together with the man, just like his sister-in-law had said.

Both before and after dinner, Hiroki paid no attention whatsoever to his little brother, instead sticking to Hirosue constantly and never letting him out of his sight. After thoroughly horsing around to the point of exhaustion, Hiroki fell asleep at Hirosue's feet. Hirosue's older brother carried him to his room before returning from the kitchen with a can of beer.

"Sorry for making you put up with that every night," he said, offering the can to Hirosue.

Their parents were resting in the far room, and Hirosue's sister-in-law was tucking the baby in in the next room. Hirosue and his older brother were the only ones in the living room. His older brother swigged about half of his can before letting out a great sigh.

"Hiroki's been jumping up and down with glee ever since you came home. He's always liked you, but now he's stuck to you like glue instead of me. Dad here is feeling a little lonely."

"I just make a good playmate, that's all."

Hirosue's older brother glanced left and right before sneaking out a cigarette.

"Only one," he said, as he opened the window and lit it. Hirosue could hear the frogs croaking outside. The air was cool, and the sounds of the night were peaceful. The slight drowsiness he felt, perhaps from the beer, was comforting. Every day was regular and gentle. Being where he was now, he could really tell just how stressful life in the city had been for him.

"Oh, yeah, I saw you this evening, I think, on the way to my delivery," his brother said as he tilted his head up and let out a puff of smoke. "You were at the embankment, weren't you?"

"Yeah. I was looking at the ocean because it was pretty."

His brother laughed.

"I remember back in the day, you used to space out like that once in a while."

"Really?"

"Really. I think it was when you were in primary school. We got worried because you weren't coming home and we went out to look for you. We found you sleeping on the beach. You said you got drowsy while watching the ocean. Both Mom and Dad were rolling their eyes."

Hirosue didn't remember very clearly, but it sounded vaguely familiar.

"When you phoned to say you wanted to come home, to be honest, I was wondering what you'd do since there are no jobs here. But never mind jobs. Maybe life in the country is more suited for you. You're looking a lot better now than when you first came back. My wife has a lot on her hands in the house, with the baby and all, and Mom and Dad are getting on in their years, too. So you've actually been a great help."

"I can't just be a freeloader, so," Hirosue smiled briefly.

"But you've been working full shifts every day at the factory. I wish I could give you even a little bit of a wage, but..."

"I'm already grateful that you're letting me stay here. Don't worry about it."

Hearing the baby wailing on the other side of the sliding doors, his brother hastily put out his cigarette.

"—Do you plan to go back to the city at all?"

Hirosue took a drink of beer. This peaceful life was something he could not even imagine back when he was in the city. Over there, the seasons were quick to change, and it was always very busy. Every person had his place; perhaps he had simply not been cut out for urban life.

If he had any lingering regret concerning the city, it was—

"If you want to stay here, you can. Mom and Dad both seem happy to have you here. I'll try asking some friends if they know any good job openings. Oh, say," his brother said suddenly, thumping his knee in recollection. "Aunt Yoshiko three houses down says there's a girl she wants to introduce you to. Apparently she's just come back from the city and she's opened her own beauty salon in the next town over. She's thirty-three and single. She's never been married, and you two are pretty close in age. I also hear she's quite a looker."

"Maybe not so soon," Hirosue said hesitantly.

Hirosue's brother slid his knees across the floor as he leaned in towards him. "Don't think too much about it. Why not just meet up with her to see what she's like?"

Hirosue hastily excused himself, saying he was sleepy, and fled to his room. He went up to the

second floor and closed the sliding door behind him. He could faintly hear the baby crying downstairs.

When he lay down on the bed, he could see the bookshelf by the window. In it were books he used to read in school, and textbooks he used to study from. Looking at them made him almost feel like the place was suspended in time.

Here was a life unlike one when he had been working at the office, when he was constantly being crushed by his complex towards his inability. In this house, he had his own place and role to play. Every man had his place. Perhaps the office was not the place for him. No—he had just not been the right man for the office.

Once the sources of his stress were behind him, they swiftly became distant things. Even their outlines began to blur, making him wonder what all his fuss had been about. It made him realize that he had been obsessed and preoccupied by something that had no real form. But to call it foolish was a harsh thing to say to his past, brooding self.

He was suddenly reminded of his cell phone, and picked it up. He never had many friends with whom he exchanged e-mails, and once he withdrew into the country, communication stopped altogether. Today, like every other, yielded no new calls or e-mails. But he did not find it particularly lonely.

Hirosue went through his e-mail history. Almost all of them were from Matsuoka until April, where it ended abruptly. Matsuoka had said he wouldn't e-mail or call anymore, and he had kept his word. Hirosue had received no contact from him whatsoever. Hirosue rolled over onto his back and looked up at the wood-panelled ceiling. He recalled the inn that he and Matsuoka had stayed at together on their trip.

What if, he imagined. What if he and Matsuoka had dated as lovers? What would have happened then? Would they kiss, have sex, and live together? He couldn't even imagine it.

Then again, perhaps it would be more like the time they went on that overnight trip together. They would lay out their futons together, talk about nothing in particular, laugh... would that have become a daily routine?

Hirosue reckoned his sister-in-law's words that afternoon were still lingering in a corner of his head. Perhaps that was why he was thinking about these things.

'You should have just married her to try it out.'

It wasn't that easy. This was another man he was talking about. Although he did harbour something akin to affection towards Matsuoka, when they had moved to the next stage of physical intimacy, an uncontrollable part of him had rejected the man. It was the sensation of something that a woman was not supposed to have. Hirosue put a hand to his chin. He could feel the slight grittiness of his stubble. In truth, he did not even remember why he had felt so repulsed.

Even when he had seen Matsuoka's naked body—and to be crude, his genitals—he had not felt anything noteworthy. He had only thought of it exactly as it appeared before his eyes—a male body. He had already confirmed that fact at the hot springs.

Rather than the carnal aspects, Hirosue felt endearment for Matsuoka in the way he laughed, or in the way the man gazed at him, or in the subtle expressions he showed. Clearly there was something wrong with him to think of a man like this, but a part of him definitely did feel that way.

The more he mulled over it, the more his thoughts became a jumbled, nonsensical mess. The bottom line was that he was not able to make Matsuoka his lover. But he had liked him as a friend. The end.

As for lingering attachments to the city—if he had any, they only concerned Matsuoka. When they parted, he had made Matsuoka cry—that was it. Matsuoka had asked if Hirosue had thought of him when he decided to go back to the country. *I should have said “I did”, even if it was a lie.* But at the time, he had been too caught up in his own feelings to show any consideration.

At the very least, he felt like he should have told Matsuoka his parents’ home address and phone number. Or, if not, that he would let him know once things settled down. Then, he wouldn’t have hurt the man enough to make him cry. But in the end, Matsuoka had been the one to say that Hirosue didn’t have to tell him.

He wanted to speak with Matsuoka. Now that he was free of the impediment that was his company, he felt like he could talk to Matsuoka with ease. He wanted to apologize for acting cold because of his petty pride. He also wanted to tell the man about his hometown. He felt like Matsuoka would listen.

But he was hesitant to crassly call or e-mail the man when he had precisely cut off all contact because they could not be lovers—because he did not want to be friends. Even so, Hirosue had a feeling that once he did get in touch, Matsuoka would interact with him just like he used to.

Although he never recalled anything about his company or work, Hirosue often recalled things about Matsuoka. In fact, memories of Matsuoka were the only ones that ever came to his mind.

The wedding of Hirosue’s best friend, Shimizu, went through a solemn ceremony and reception before switching to an informal class reunion at the after-party. Since the ceremony was local, all the invited guests were already acquainted with each other. The pair at the centre of the day were all but ignored as the guests grouped off and enjoyed themselves as they pleased. The atmosphere of the party was new and refreshing to Hirosue, who had not had a chance to eat out since quitting his company. He also enjoyed himself chatting with some old friends whom he hadn’t seen in a long time.

Shimizu’s wife was a little plump, a woman one would call “cute” rather than “pretty”. She was in her early twenties and a decade younger than the groom. “If this was ten years earlier, it would be against the law,” the guests teased with a mix of envy, and the topic was the joke of the day.

Shimizu had already consumed a generous amount of alcohol at the wedding hall, thanks to the encouragement of those around him. By the time they moved to a bar for their after-party, he was quite drunk. Hirosue had been drinking quietly in a corner when Shimizu yanked him out of his seat and made a loud declaration for all to hear.

“When this guy here gets married, I’m going to give a speech for him! So please, someone find him a girl!” he announced, in a completely unasked-for PR pitch.

Thanks to Shimizu, Hirosue was approached by about five people who asked him why he wasn’t getting married. Each time, he brushed them off vaguely by telling them he hadn’t quite found the right time yet.

"How about my little sister?" one person suggested. Hirosue couldn't tell if he was serious or kidding, and had a hard time finding a way to politely turn him down. Partway through, the groom passed out drunk, and was taken home by the bride. The party continued even after the pair of honour had left, and finally wrapped up when the first trains had started running the next morning.

Hirosue walked home with a primary-school friend in the cold morning air and the light of the dawn. He had quite a way to walk until his house, but it wasn't far enough to take a taxi.

On the way, they emerged on a road that ran along the seaside, and the air was suddenly filled with the briny scent of the ocean. The waves were high and the wind was strong. The ocean waters were a little rough. Despite Hirosue's warning that it was dangerous, his childhood friend climbed up and walked along the embankment.

"You're lucky to be single, you know," he said. "You're free to do anything you want. It's nice having a family, but you have to deal with a bunch of petty troubles that aren't even your own. They just keep snowballing."

His friend had three children and had just been promoted to section manager this year. His hair, as if to reflect his troubles, was starting to thin. His body, in contrast, had gained a generous amount of flesh around his girth.

"It's not that I regret getting married," his friend added. His thick body staggered on the embankment, and Hirosue hastily clung to the man's legs. By squatting down, he somehow managed to prevent the man from falling over the embankment onto the sand on the other side. The embankment itself was quite towering at five metres. Even if his childhood friend fell into the sand, he would probably sustain quite serious injuries. Hirosue's heart had nearly stopped with fear.

"I *told* you it was dangerous," he told his friend sternly. The man slumped his shoulders and bowed his head.

"—You know, there was this girl I used to love," he said abruptly, on a completely different tangent. "It must have been ten some-odd years ago. When I met her, I was already dating my wife, and she was also dating someone else, so I couldn't tell her I loved her. But I could tell she had a thing for me. I still wonder sometimes about what would have happened if I'd told her I'd loved her. And if it'd gone well, I wonder if my life would have changed."

The friend laughed.

"I dated a good number of girls until I got married, you know. But she's the only one I still remember. Maybe I should have told her back then that I loved her. Maybe I regret not saying anything, and that's why I still can't let go."

Hirosue let out a small sigh before setting his bottom down beside his friend's round figure. He lapsed deep into thought as he gazed at the ocean.

"Maybe the fact that nothing ever happened is why you keep imagining what would have or could have happened."

"Imagine?" his friend said, turning towards him.

"The less you know about a person, the more you can imagine things about her. The more you can imagine, the more hope you can have."

His friend smiled wryly.

"Imagination, huh. But imagination's not reality, is it? Maybe I was idealizing her."

Hirosue felt a snag in his heart at the word “idealize”. Someone had told him before that his standards were too high. It had been—his brother, perhaps? He felt like Hayama had also said something similar. Yes, it was when he had told her about Yoko Eto. Apart from the fact that she was actually Matsuoka, Yoko Eto was always flawless in his memories.

If his friend’s memories of that woman was a product of his idealization, what was his Yoko Eto? The difference that set him and his friend apart was that he had actually dated Yoko Eto. She was not an ideal. She was reality.

“I had a girl like that in my life, too,” Hirosue said. “I loved her so much, I couldn’t forget about her.”

His friend slowly turned towards him. “And?”

“And? And nothing. We just dated for a bit.”

“Why didn’t you get married?”

Hirosue was stuck for words. The woman with whom he had seriously considered marriage with was actually a man. His friend seemed to interpret Hirosue’s silence for something else.

“Wait, was it an affair? You don’t seem like the type, though.”

Hirosue smiled wryly. “No, it wasn’t. But a lot of things happened.”

“You’re lucky, though,” his friend said.

“Why?”

“Why? Because you’re single. You still have a chance to get back together with her. Oh—or wait, is she going out with someone else now? Or did she get married?”

“She’s single. Whether she’s dating anyone else or not—I don’t know. I couldn’t say.”

They had parted at the end of March, when the air had still been chilly. Matsuoka, who seldom raised his voice, had laid bare his emotions, yelled, and said that he loved him.

Hirosue couldn’t help but feel like Matsuoka still had feelings for him. Was he simply interpreting things conveniently? It was no surprise if Matsuoka was dating someone else now. Hayama had told him she loved him, and yet had partaken in a marriage interview and found her life partner not even a month after they broke up.

Come to think of it—he remembered. He had broken up once with Yoko Eto when he found out she was Matsuoka. He had thought that Matsuoka had been toying with him by disguising as a woman. Later, he would find out that it was not true, and that Matsuoka had been serious in his own way. After they broke up, Hirosue had been foolish enough to run into Matsuoka at a gathering meant to introduce Matsuoka to a girl. In those few months when they had stopped seeing each other, Matsuoka had also been looking for someone else.

That was why it was only natural if Matsuoka was dating someone else right now. He had no obligation to Hirosue, who had told him he could not be his lover, and had left without even telling him his address.

Matsuoka with someone else—he did not even want to imagine it. He did not want to see Matsuoka like that. Why didn’t he? Was he sore to lose a person who claimed to love him so much? Even while knowing that he could not be a romantic partner to Matsuoka, no matter how much love Matsuoka directed at him?

He had never hated Matsuoka. Although they had parted ways because Matsuoka had said

they couldn't be friends, if he hadn't said so, Hirosue would have liked to continue their friendship.

"So the girl I liked," his friend continued, "she got married. Not to my friend, though. Apparently she's in Saitama right now." The man hopped off the embankment onto the sidewalk with a grunt. "She used to be really pretty. But I look nothing like I used to with all this extra weight. If we saw each other now, with our ages written clearly across our faces, maybe the disappointment would make me finally get over her."

That's the harsh way to go about it, Hirosue remarked inwardly. His friend gave a great stretch towards the sky.

"Ah, never mind," he said. "It's a man's innocent romance, and I'll keep it tucked away in my heart as a beautiful memory. People still need to dream, you know." Before they parted ways, his friend asked him to keep quiet to his wife about his story of a man's innocent romance. Hirosue laughed and told him he would.

"I don't regret getting married, you know. But there's always space in a man's heart for innocent love. Anyway, Shimizu's wedding yesterday—great day, huh? And she's a decade younger than him—he's really putting himself out there. Your turn next, eh?"

Hirosue saw his friend off as the man made his way to the public apartment complexes. He then walked by himself along the seaside. In the light of the rising sun, he stopped and took in his surroundings. There was really nothing at all. Nothing here, apart from the ocean, the mountains, and the small village.

He suddenly remembered that Matsuoka had mentioned wanting to visit the countryside. *I should have invited him,* he thought. Even though there was nothing here, Matsuoka had said he wanted to come. But Hirosue had a feeling that even if Matsuoka did come, the scenery would not match him very well.

When Hirosue got home, his sister-in-law was up and making breakfast. Although he had told her he would be coming home late, he hadn't expected to be coming back the next morning. He felt a little awkward.

"Welcome home, Mr. Out-All-Night," she quipped as soon as their eyes met.

"Sorry," Hirosue apologized. His sister-in-law giggled.

"Weddings over here can get pretty crazy with the after-parties. Norifumi was saying you might be coming home the next morning. Which brings me to this message from your big brother: you can take the day off work."

"But—"

His sister-in-law gave a cheerful shrug. "Why not? You have your big brother's permission. I think he feels bad that you've been helping out nonstop ever since coming home, Motofumi."

His sister-in-law then asked if he would like breakfast, but Hirosue graciously declined. Without even bothering to take a bath, he collapsed onto his bed still wearing his suit. He felt something hard and bumpy around his hip, and took it out wondering what it was. It turned out to be his cell phone.

The light was flashing, signalling a new e-mail. Hirosue swallowed hard. Perhaps it was from Matsuoka. Perhaps it said he wanted to talk, or that he wanted to meet. He wouldn't know what to do if Matsuoka said he loved him, but if he was satisfied with just meeting up, Hirosue certainly wanted

to meet. He also wanted to talk with Matsuoka.

Hirosue opened the message. When he saw the name that appeared on the screen, he was truthfully disappointed. It was not from Matsuoka; it was from Hayama. It said she wanted to talk to him about something, and asked for a good time to call. She didn't seem to be in a rush, and it was still seven-thirty in the morning. Hirosue closed his cell phone with a snap.

Why had he assumed it was from Matsuoka? The man had said he would never e-mail or call him again. They hadn't been in touch for over a month and a half; what had made him think that today would be any different? Was it because he had been thinking of Matsuoka on the way home? Or because he had been thinking about how much he wanted to speak to him?

Hirosue placed his cell phone at his bedside. He rolled around in bed until he ended up falling asleep. He did not get back to Hayama until the afternoon.

It was sunny most of the time in May. As soon as they entered June, it began to rain for days on end, and the temperature remained uncharacteristically chilly. When it rained, Hirosue had to take special care not to get his delivery wet, which required more mental energy. That, on top of the chill, caused Hirosue to come down with a cold at this strange time of the year.

July rolled around just as he was finally fully recovered. The sun's rays suddenly turned scorching, and the temperature and humidity skyrocketed. Since Hirosue's room had no air conditioning, with every day that passed, it became harder to sleep at night.

When Hirosue had first come back to the country, his cell phone had been so insignificant he would often forget where he put it; nowadays, he carried it around everywhere. He opened it several times a day to check for new calls or e-mails, even when it didn't ring. He kept expecting Matsuoka to contact him.

Back in mid-May, Hayama got in touch with him to ask if he would attend her wedding. Although he did want to see Hayama in her bridal outfit, he was hesitant to give an answer. He reckoned the groom would not be very eager to invite a man who dated Hayama in the past.

When Hirosue truthfully told her so, Hayama laughed on the other end of the line.

"I won't tell him we used to go out. But even if he knew, I don't think he'd mind. He has a big heart," she reassured him. "One of the guests we invited cancelled, so we had an empty seat. That's when he told me I should invite someone I want to see. You've moved back to the country, right, Hirosue? When I thought about how this might be our last chance to meet up again, I started wanting to see your face."

When she said it like that, it made Hirosue want to see her, too. He told her he would be very glad to attend. He suddenly wondered if Matsuoka would be attending. Hayama and Matsuoka were in the same cohort and department. They were also close. It was very likely that he had been invited as well. Hirosue wanted to know, but he felt like it would be poor manners to ask about specific guests by name. He sent out feelers in a roundabout way instead.

"Are there a lot of people coming from your work?"

"I've only invited my bosses and a few of the girls. The ceremony itself isn't going to be very big. Most of the people from Sales aren't going to show up until the after-party. It's easier to have a

relaxed conversation there than at the ceremony.”

If her boss and the girls were the only ones attending, Matsuoka was probably not invited. It looked like he would not have a chance to see the man at the wedding. Perhaps Matsuoka was coming to the after-party, but Hirosue knew he would only feel uncomfortable being the only one from a different department. That was probably why Hayama had invited him to the wedding and not the after-party.

As soon as Hirosue had the excuse to go back to Tokyo for the wedding, his desire to see Matsuoka became stronger by the day—enough to surprise him. These days, he often remembered when they used to meet up after work to go out for dinner. They would eat, chat about everyday things—it had been fun. But he knew it was cruel to ask Matsuoka to meet with him as a friend again when he had ceased all contact precisely because he didn’t want to be friends.

That was why he eagerly awaited Matsuoka to get in touch with him first. Although he could not ask Matsuoka to meet him, they would be able to see each other if Matsuoka was the one to bring it up. If Matsuoka initiated it, it would be a sign that he had acknowledged that they could still be friends. Hirosue’s trip to Tokyo was the perfect opportunity.

Hirosue continued to wait for word from Matsuoka until the day before Hayama’s wedding. The ceremony was set to start at a late hour of the day, so Hirosue planned to leave his house in the morning.

That night, Hirosue did an unusual thing and had Japanese *sake* with his dinner, getting pleasantly drunk.

“Are you sure you should have had that much to drink?” asked his sister-in-law worriedly. Hirosue paid no mind to her and climbed unsteadily up the stairs. Once he returned to his room, he clawed for his phone.

He let his drunken bravery take hold as he wrote an e-mail to Matsuoka.

‘It’s been a while. I hope you’re well. I’ll be going to Tokyo tomorrow for Ms. Hayama’s wedding. I plan to stay in the city on Saturday and Sunday, and I was wondering if we could meet and have a chat if you have the time.’

He debated greatly over how to phrase it, and ended up truthfully writing that he wanted to meet and talk. Would he confuse and hurt Matsuoka again by sending this kind of e-mail? Would the man get angry at him and ask him why he was getting in touch when he was trying to forget about him? Hirosue still wanted to see him. He wanted to talk to him. He could not understand why he was so stubbornly attached to Matsuoka when he didn’t see the man as a romantic interest.

The same thing had happened once before. He had not been able to stop thinking about Matsuoka, and the thoughts filling his head had made him unable to sit still. Hirosue had ended up going to the station to wait for Matsuoka to go home. It wasn’t really waiting—he had only watched the man from the opposite platform. But that time, too, he had been unsure of his feelings, and because he was unsure, he had not been able to approach Matsuoka. Every day, he only gazed at the man as he made his way home. Somewhere, he expected that by continuing to observe him, he would somehow arrive at an answer.

What was he feeling now, then? What was his desire to see the man? These feelings felt a touch too warm to be those of friendship. He had given the final verdict by saying it was physically

impossible; was he still going to claim that he was in love?

He wasn't going to get an answer, no matter how much he mulled over his emotions inside his head. He didn't even know what that answer was supposed to be. His head started to hurt from thinking too much. The fastest, easiest way was to see Matsuoka in person. But in order to see him, he had to get in touch with him. He had to send an e-mail. Perhaps they wouldn't be able to meet on Saturday because of the wedding—in that case, they could meet on Sunday. But it was the weekend. Perhaps Matsuoka had plans. Yet, Hirosue had a feeling that if he were to tell Matsuoka he wanted to see him, the man would cancel his plans so they could meet. But even if Matsuoka prioritized him, he might not be able to change his plans on such short notice. That was why Hirosue had to get in touch sometime today, at the latest—

Empowered by drink, Hirosue pushed the send button which he had hesitated to press these past few days. He closed his cell phone and pressed it against his forehead, waiting for a reply. An e-mail came almost immediately, making his heart nearly stop with surprise. He hastily opened his cell phone.

“—What?”

The e-mail had come back with an error message. Hirosue had sent it in reply to an e-mail from Matsuoka, so there was no way the address could be wrong. He tried sending it again, but that also came back. Next, instead of replying, he sent it through the address in his phone book, but the result was the same. The e-mail came back with an error.

The inebriation which had empowered his recklessness quickly drained away from him. Why wasn't the e-mail getting through? Hirosue tightly clutched his cell phone.

He had a guess in mind, so he called the number to test it. He would probably regret it regardless of whether he called or not; if so, he might as well call—that made him take the leap. —The phone did ring. But the person who answered it was not Matsuoka. It was a complete stranger.

There was no doubt about it. Matsuoka had changed his e-mail address and phone number, and Hirosue had not received notice of the change. Matsuoka had said he would never call or e-mail again; perhaps it was only natural that Hirosue wasn't notified.

He had thought that one button press was all it took to get through to Matsuoka—that as long as he, Hirosue, had the guts to make that step, he would be able to see the man easily. But when he could not get in touch, Matsuoka suddenly seemed much further away. This was what Matsuoka had meant when he said he would never contact him again—this was his resolve, laid plain and bare before Hirosue's face.

Maybe Matsuoka was trying to forget him. —No, Matsuoka *was* trying to forget him. Hirosue could only sit in stunned silence at the immovable fact before him.

On the day of the wedding, Hirosue left his house in the morning and arrived at Tokyo Station before twelve o'clock. It had been raining in his hometown, but the weather here was clear and sunny. Perhaps it had rained a little in the morning, for there were some puddles left behind.

He took the train to the business hotel he was planning to stay at. He was told he could not check in yet, so he left his things with the front desk. The wedding was at five, and the venue was

about fifteen minutes by train from the hotel. If he came back to the hotel by half past three, it would give him more than enough time to get ready.

It would have been easier for him to book a hotel close to the wedding venue, but he had chosen one a little far away because it was a five-minute walk from Matsuoka's apartment.

Hirosue knew Matsuoka had a reason for not informing him of his new phone number and e-mail address. He knew it wasn't good to stir things up when Matsuoka was avoiding contact and confrontation. Hirosue was only acting on his own urge to see him; it was not like he could offer Matsuoka the kind of solution that would make him happy.

But even so, he reasoned with himself, what was wrong with simply seeing his face? Then again, he wondered if he would be satisfied just to meet with Matsuoka. What if they met, but Matsuoka clearly showed distaste at the sight of him? Would it still remove the knot in his heart?

The cicadas were causing a deafening din around Matsuoka's apartment building. The mass of noise was coming from within the few large trees in front of the bicycle lot. When he looked up at Matsuoka's suite from outside, he could see the curtain drawn open. He had a feeling that Matsuoka was home. But even after arriving in front of his door, Hirosue could not ring the doorbell. He was afraid. If Matsuoka gave him a look as if to ask what the hell he was doing here now, he felt like he wouldn't be able to say a single word back. Hirosue had a feeling that Matsuoka was still in love with him, but perhaps that was his assumption. Perhaps Matsuoka was getting on well with someone new. Hirosue had no idea—none at all. He knew nothing of Matsuoka's life over these past four months. He knew that the man had changed his cell phone number and e-mail address—but apart from that, he knew nothing.

There was a heavy click as the lock was drawn, and before Hirosue could mentally brace himself, the door to Matsuoka's apartment opened. Hirosue drew back, startled, and was startled once more to realize that the person who was at the door was not Matsuoka, but a young woman. He did not recognize her face. Was she his girlfriend?

"Um... can I help you?" the woman asked when she noticed Hirosue.

"Uh... um, no, that's okay."

The woman locked her door behind her and started walking towards the elevators. She looked like she was in her mid-twenties. She had short hair and a cute face. So Matsuoka had gotten a girlfriend after all. Unlike Hirosue, who had whiled his life away in the country as if suspended in time, Matsuoka's own timeline was moving steadily forward.

His fingertips trembled. Matsuoka had told him he loved him, but they had never dated—at least, he hadn't thought of it that way. His "friend" had only gotten a girlfriend—what was he so agitated about?

Besides, what had he come here to do in the first place? It was to see Matsuoka. His objective had been to see Matsuoka, and that didn't matter if he had a girlfriend or not. In fact, if he did have a girlfriend, Hirosue could have her handle the romance side of things so the two of them could just be friends. That was what he had always wanted, but somewhere he didn't feel quite satisfied.

But Hirosue wasn't sure of that fact yet. He hadn't asked her if they were lovers. Maybe they were only acquaintances. His feet began to move. He broke into a run. He caught up to the woman waiting at the elevators.

"Um—excuse me."

The woman slowly turned around. "Oh, it's you again."

"May I ask what—what kind of relationship you have with Mr. Yosuke Matsuoka?"

"Huh?" the woman asked, creasing her brow and tilting her head.

"You're acquainted with Mr. Yosuke Matsuoka, right?"

"Who is that?" the woman looked at him warily.

"You just came out of Matsuoka's apartment, didn't you?"

"That's my apartment."

This time, Hirosue was the one to tilt his head. "But... it's Room 502, right?"

"I've been living there since May of this year. Maybe you're talking about the person who used to live there before me. Once in a while, I get advertisements addressed to someone like that."

"That's... um, I'm really sorry."

Hirosue left the apartment building in defeat. Matsuoka had not only changed his cell number and e-mail address, but had even moved out of his apartment. Was this on purpose? Or was it a coincidence?

On a weekday, he would perhaps be able to catch Matsuoka if he waited at the station close to the office. But today was Saturday, and tomorrow was Sunday. He had to head back home on Sunday. Even if he extended his stay for one more day until Monday to stake him out, he would miss the last local line going back home if he waited past the end of the work day. Either way, he wouldn't be able to see Matsuoka. Stay until Tuesday, then? But he had work to help out with, and he couldn't afford to be out of the house for so long.

"What should I do?" he muttered to himself, but there was nothing he could do. Nothing. If he was well-aware of one thing, it was precisely that.

After returning to the hotel, he agonized over how else he could get in touch with Matsuoka. He wasn't completely out of options yet: he could still stay until Tuesday and wait in front of the office. But that would take up more time than necessary, and there was still the possibility that Matsuoka, being in Sales, would go straight home from his rounds. There were also people at the office whom Hirosue was acquainted with. If he could, he preferred to avoid exposing himself to the disdainful stares of those he knew, who would wonder what business Hirosue had at the office when he had been laid off.

Or he could ask someone. But he was reluctant to bother Hayama just for Matsuoka's contact information when she was probably busy with the wedding. That left him with the option of asking Fukuda, his former boss and Matsuoka's acquaintance. They had barely talked at all since Hirosue was transferred to Koishikawa, and Fukuda did not like him much.

Maybe it would be quicker just to go to the after-party instead of asking around. Matsuoka would probably be there. Would anyone bother to invite Hirosue to the after-party when he was in a different department? —That didn't matter, he would just speak up and say he would like to go. That way, no one would probably refuse.

He thought about this and that until it was nearly time for the wedding. Hirosue changed into his suit and fixed his hair. He fought a fierce struggle with the stubborn cowlick on the back of his head. Once he was able to pat it down into a respectable form, he left the hotel. Although it had been

sunny during the day, the sky was now darkened with a layer of clouds. It looked like a bit of rain was on the way.

He had left early with time to spare since he didn't want to be late, but he lapsed into thought and ended up missing his stop. He hastily hopped on the train going back.

Once he got off at the right station, Hirosue found himself in the middle of construction work. There was only one available exit, which led him out in the opposite direction from the hotel. Time had ticked by steadily as he was missing his stop and taking detours, and by the time Hirosue arrived at the venue, it was three minutes until the reception. Most of the guests had signed in and gone inside. The only person left in the lobby was the receptionist.

As Hirosue scribbled hastily in the guestbook, he spotted Matsuoka's name three names above his. His hand stopped in surprise. The man he had wanted to see was here. Hayama had said only her boss and some girls were coming, but Matsuoka had also been invited to the ceremony.

"Sir—the ceremony is starting soon," the receptionist urged him hesitantly. Hirosue hastily ran his pen across the page. He received a table number and headed to the hall where the ceremony was being held. The doors were already closed, and when he opened it quietly, he could see that everyone was already seated. He stood lost in front of the door, not knowing where he was supposed to sit. Someone who looked like a staff member approached him and took him to his table. On the way to his seat, the lights suddenly went out. It looked like the bride and groom were about to make their entrance.

"This is your seat, sir." He was offered a chair at a round table of about ten people. It was too dark to see very well, but Hirosue felt like there were a lot of females there. He could feel all eyes on him because he had come late, and it was embarrassing. He tried to draw his chair, and ended up tripping over nothing and falling forward.

"Whoa!" he cried out unintentionally. He could hear a suppressed giggle from across the table, and he felt his face go beet-red from embarrassment.

As soon as he sat down, a fanfare began to play. A set of doors, illuminated by a spotlight, slowly swung open inwards. Hayama in a traditional Japanese wedding *kimono* entered with the groom.

The room grew a little brighter from the spotlight, and Hirosue could finally see the faces of the people seated at his table. His breath caught in his throat. He doubted his eyes. The very man he had agonized over how to contact was sitting right beside him. His hair was a little shorter, and the stubble on his chin was still there. He looked like he had lost even more weight.

"It's been a while, Matsuoka," Hirosue said. The man glanced at him.

"It has," he said, inclining his head. It was too dim to clearly see the expression on his face, but his tone of voice seemed somewhat distant.

The table that Hirosue was seated at seemed to consist mostly of people from the sales department. There were five men and five women. The only person he knew there was Matsuoka.

Hirosue had figured their adjacent seats would enable them to discuss a lot, but Matsuoka continued to drag on his conversation with the young man on his right, refusing to even look at

Hirosue. To make things worse, the person sitting to Hirose's left was a gregarious, slightly older man in his mid-fifties who frequently tried to start up a conversation with him. It seemed the man had been Hayama's boss before she transferred to Sales, when she was still in Goods Management. Presumably he had been quite uncomfortable at a table full of Sales people, for as soon as he found out that Hirose had been at Koishikawa Laboratory, he mentioned he had been transferred there for a number of months himself, and seemed to feel quite a sense of camaraderie between them.

Hirosue rather wanted to speak with Matsuoka, but the man from Goods Management was very long-winded. All Hirose had to do on his end was insert an interjection once in a while, since the man carried on very well on his own. But the man also switched from one topic to another without pause, and it was hard to see an end.

About halfway through the ceremony, the man from Goods Management finally stood from his seat, probably to go to the restroom. The young man who had been talking with Matsuoka also turned to talk to the older man sitting on his other side. Matsuoka, without someone to talk to, was silently forking food to his mouth.

"Um, would you like any beer?" Desperate to start a conversation somehow, Hirose offered to pour Matsuoka some beer. Matsuoka threw a glance at him.

"Thank you," he said, thrusting out his half-empty glass.

"You look like you're doing well."

Matsuoka took only one sip of the beer before putting his glass down.

"Sure, well enough." Matsuoka's words were aloof enough to make him feel uncomfortable. Matsuoka seemed just as distant as Hirose had first sensed. Hirose wondered if the man found him a nuisance. The thought made it suddenly more difficult to talk. But Hirose still opened his mouth as if compelled to say something.

"I didn't expect to see you here, Matsuoka."

"Well, I *am* in the same cohort as Hayama. I didn't think you'd be invited either, Hirose."

He was distant, but he did not ignore him. Matsuoka was still tolerating him enough to give him an answer.

"I e-mailed you when I decided to attend Ms. Hayama's wedding. But I couldn't get through."

"Oh, I changed my phone."

"Why?"

After an awkward pause, Matsuoka smiled. "What good would it do you to know?"

Hirosue hesitated over his answer.

"I dropped it," Matsuoka went on to explain without a hitch. "There was a specific model I wanted, so I switched wireless providers while I was at it."

So Matsuoka had not changed his phone to sever ties with him. Hirose was still thinking of his next words when Matsuoka turned to the man next to him to start a conversation, proceeding to leave Hirose behind. The man from Goods Management came back and began to talk about golf, even though Hirose had told him he had never played. Once again, he lost the chance to talk to Matsuoka.

Soon, it was time for a costume change, and Hayama left the banquet hall. Matsuoka got out of his seat at almost the same time. Hirose left the chatty man from Goods Management with a word of

apology and went after Matsuoka. He thought the man had gone to the restroom, but there was no one there. He would have had to run into Matsuoka on his way out because he had come straight here. There was something wrong. The wedding was still going on. Had Matsuoka gone home? *Don't tell me*, Hirosue wondered as he made his way back to the banquet hall. Suddenly, he caught a whiff of cigarette smoke.

He remembered this scent. Hirosue furtively peeked into the passageway tucked away to his right. At the end of the passage was a small smoking area. Matsuoka was leaning against the wall smoking beside the ashtray. Smoking was not prohibited at the venue, and those who wanted to smoke were free to do so. Indeed, the man who came to sit down beside Matsuoka was a heavy smoker.

Matsuoka looked up at the ceiling and let a ribbon of smoke issue lazily from his lips. Hirosue was aware that Matsuoka smoked, but the man had also said he only did so once in a while. He had only smelled smoke on Matsuoka once, when the man had given him a get-well visit at his apartment.

Matsuoka wore an apathetic expression with the cigarette in his mouth. He looked like a totally different person. Hirosue could not help but stare; he had never seen the man like this before. When they were together, Matsuoka had always been cheerful and energetic—that was the only impression he had of the man.

Matsuoka took his time smoking one cigarette before he ground the rest out and threw it in the ashtray. When he finally turned this way, his eyes met Hirosue's, and a look of clear surprise and dismay crossed his face. Matsuoka dipped his face awkwardly and kept his eyes lowered as he slipped past Hirosue.

"Um—" Hirosue called out. Matsuoka's feet took three or four steps and stopped. But they soon began to move again as the man made his way back into the banquet hall. Matsuoka had definitely heard Hirosue's voice—he had stopped in his tracks, after all—but he had kept going without turning around. Hirosue had clearly been ignored.

Matsuoka still gave him the most minimal of answers in the presence of other people, but perhaps this was his honest reaction. Matsuoka no longer wanted to talk to him, and wanted nothing to do with him anymore.

Hirosue felt like he was plummeting after the ground had disappeared beneath his feet. Matsuoka had gotten completely sick of him. Oblivious to that fact, Hirosue had foolishly come to Tokyo wanting to see him. Now, he felt immensely miserable at his naive expectation. He hadn't been able to get in touch. All the signs had been there. But he had pretended not to notice.

He couldn't be away from his seat forever, so Hirosue returned to the banquet hall. Inside, Hayama had changed her costume and was on the podium cutting the cake.

The ceremony progressed steadily, but all of it passed unnoticed before his eyes. The man sitting beside him now seemed like a world away. Hirosue had wanted so badly to speak to him, but now he couldn't remember what he had wanted to say. He didn't know how to interact with Matsuoka anymore, now that the man was ignoring him.

The man had loved him—had told him he loved him. That was why Hirosue could talk to him without restraint. Now, the Matsuoka beside him was trim, fresh-faced, good-looking, and was like a completely different living being from him. Perhaps Matsuoka had been like that all along. His claim

to love Hirosue must have been some kind of abnormal blip. Hirosue was sure of it.

Reality was right beside him; yet, Hirosue unearthed memories from the past. Matsuoka opening his mouth wide to eat the snow; his profile, blushing and childishly stubborn. Had those been lies? No. That had also been Matsuoka, too. But the man giving him the cold shoulder beside him was also Matsuoka. Hirosue could feel his chest being squeezed painfully. His throat turned dry.

Hirosue continued to fret in agitation over the firm, solid line drawn between himself and Matsuoka. Before long, the wedding was over. The bride and groom saw them out as all of the guests exited into the lobby. Hirosue held the bag containing his wedding souvenir in one hand and cast his eyes around to search for Matsuoka.

It's no use now, whispered his easily-discouraged self. *Look at the way he's ignoring you. He's gotten sick of you. You shouldn't meet with him again. Get over it. You and him ended on that day in March.* He dropped his gaze. —*If I was over it, I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be looking for Matsuoka.*

"Hey, Chief Matsuoka, are you coming to the after-party, too?"

Hirosue heard a young man's voice behind him and turned around. Matsuoka was standing in the shadow of a pillar to his right. The girls who had been sitting at their table surrounded him like flowers in a bouquet.

"Knock it off with that 'Chief' thing. I'm not used to it. Makes my spine crawl." Matsuoka was smiling wryly.

"You bet I won't," the young man responded cheekily. "It's how I push your buttons." Matsuoka gave the man a gentle shove on the shoulder. They seemed to get along well, even with the man's joking attitude.

"Yeah, I'll go to the after-party," Matsuoka said. "I told Hayama I'd go."

The cheerful atmosphere within the members of the group made it somewhat difficult for Hirosue to approach them. The girls surrounding Matsuoka were looking up at him with adoration. When he spotted their gazes, Hirosue felt something stir restlessly in the bottom of his heart.

"You know what I thought? Ms. Hayama's sure didn't choose him for his looks, did she?" the young man remarked insolently.

"That's not true!" the girls around him protested. It was true; to be completely honest, to call the groom good-looking would be quite an exaggeration. But still....

"He looked like a really nice guy. Sweet, you know? I like those types of people," Matsuoka said reflectively.

"Well, he sure did seem like the laid-back type," the young man conceded. "Oh, anyway, about the after party—the restaurant is a little far away, so I thought we could split up and go by taxi. I had them book about three cars..."

Once Hirosue missed this opportunity, there were none left to him. And because there were other people around, he knew he wouldn't be pointedly ignored. Hirosue approached the group of sales department workers. One of the girls hanging about Matsuoka noticed him. Before Hirosue could say anything, she gave him a smile and spoke to him.

"You were sitting at our table, right?"

"Um. Yes."

Matsuoka had turned around and was looking at him.

"Um—I was wondering if I could talk to Mr. Matsuoka—"

All eyes in the group turned to Matsuoka. Just then, they heard the voice of a hotel employee.

"Is Mr. Shinozaki here?"

The young man who had been sitting beside Matsuoka raised his right hand.

"I'm here, I'm here," he said. "Looks like that's the first taxi. Chief Matsuoka, what do you want to do? I was thinking you could go with the first group..."

"Oh, sure. I'll go on ahead, then." Matsuoka put on a fake-looking smile. "I'm on my way to the after-party now," he said to Hirosue. "Let's catch up another time." It was a smooth refusal. The girl beside Matsuoka spoke up.

"Would you like to come to Ms. Hayama's after-party, too?" she offered.

"Mr. Hirosue's from a different department," Matsuoka intervened. "And our drinking party is going to be full of Sales people. I'm sure he'd only find it a nuisance if you invited him."

"Oh—I guess so. I'm sorry," the girl apologized hastily. Hirosue was sure Matsuoka was only using their different departments as a polite excuse to avoid him.

"When would I be able to talk to you?" he persisted.

There was no answer to Hirosue's question. Hirosue no longer knew Matsuoka's phone number or e-mail address. The man's home address had changed as well. Try as he may, it was difficult to establish an opportunity if Matsuoka was not willing to.

"I'm going to be staying the night here," Hirosue continued. "So maybe when the after-party is finished..."

Matsuoka tilted his head. "I don't know what time I'd be done. I don't want to make you wait."

"Then, it can be tomorrow. If it's until four o'clock tomorrow, I'll still be..."

"I have plans all day tomorrow starting in the morning."

Matsuoka agilely deflected every attempt. Hirosue had no way to gain a foothold on him. Matsuoka murmured discreetly to the girls to go ahead and get on the taxi, and sent them out of the hotel.

"Matsuoka, do you remember the business hotel called Verda close to the condo you used to live in? I'm staying in Room 305 over there. It doesn't matter what time. I—"

"You're telling me to go over there after the party is over?" Matsuoka stared straight into Hirosue's eyes. "I won't go. I won't go even after the party is over. —I don't want to go."

"Why not?"

"Why not?" Matsuoka echoed, smiling bitterly. "Because I don't want to. Isn't that enough of a reason?"

After uttering those words, Matsuoka turned on his heel. Hirosue could see the man climbing into the taxi. He hung his head and stood there, rooted to the spot. It was a while before he could move again.

Hirosue headed to the *izakaya* that he used to frequent when he lived in this area. He ordered drinks and no food. He started off the bat with *sake* and drank with the intention of getting drunk. But even after the drunkenness set in, it did him no good. Melancholic clouds continued to roll in and

depress his spirits.

"Mr. Hirosue, are you alright? Are you sure I shouldn't call a taxi?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he reassured the worried female manager and staggered out of the restaurant. He walked towards the station. He felt like walking on and on forever. He wanted to walk to the ends of the earth, become wore down like a piece of scrap wood, and meet his end. He began to feel quite reckless about the future. Right now, he was not afraid to die.

But his self-derogatory feelings began to fade when the alcohol began to leave his system. Walking was tiring, obviously. And no matter how much he wanted to forget, he could not. He remembered those eyes that rejected him. He felt a kind of pain as if his heart were being wrung out, and his own inadequacy was enough to make him shake. He was ashamed of himself. Embarrassed.

Matsuoka had cut him loose. Hirosue had been made to face that fact in all its harshness. Even though he had already known, he had pressed forward stubbornly under the misconception that Matsuoka was still in love with him.

Hirosue conveniently found a station along his line and got onto the train from there. As he was bumped along, tears began to spill from his eyes. He had been the one to end the relationship. He hadn't been the one to get dumped. He had only been ignored and given the cold shoulder. He had no right to cry at something as insignificant as this. He wasn't a child.

Shameful of his tears, Hirosue lowered his head, fell asleep, and ended up missing his station. He took the train back and finally arrived at the right stop. The scenery was still somewhat familiar to him, all because he had purposely reserved a hotel near Matsuoka's condo—even though he knew the man was no longer there, all the past memories that his surroundings triggered were unbearable. Hirosue bought three sealed glasses of *sake* at a nearby convenience store.

Like a delinquent teenager, he sat down outside the convenience store and emptied one can. He hated the feeling of coming out of a drunken buzz and the anticipation of returning to his normal mental state, and so he yanked himself back into inebriation. With his mind sluggish like a limp, stretched-out rubber band, Hirosue wondered what he had expected from Matsuoka.

Was he trying to force friendship onto a man who had insisted that he could not be friends? Was he doing this despite the fact that Matsuoka had told him over and over that he loved him, and that he wanted to be in a relationship? It was still a vague idea in Hirosue's mind, but finally, after all this time, he began to feel like he understood how Matsuoka felt. And he felt exasperation was only a natural reaction for Matsuoka to have towards someone like him.

A teardrop fell. He hadn't realized he was crying, so he touched his cheek to make sure. It turned out to be rain. He had expected some rain before the ceremony, and now here it was. Hirosue slid back in his seat underneath the narrow eaves. They did not cover his legs, which stuck out and got wet. But he didn't care. He didn't feel cold. Hirosue opened his second glass of *sake*.

He was woken by the sensation of collapsing heavily. His face hurt. Red carpet. Feet.

"A-Are you alright, sir?"

Someone's voice.

"Sorry, can you actually give me a hand after all?"

He heard Matsuoka's voice. But that soon faded away. His body was floating. As he watched his legs quaver unsteadily like jelly, he caught a whiff of cigarettes.

"Are you sure you don't want us to call an ambulance?" someone's voice said worriedly.

"I think he's just drunk. —If it looks like I need to take him to the hospital, I'll call the front desk." Matsuoka's voice again. The feeling of rising up. He wondered if he was being lifted to heaven as his thoughts melted. He was sleepy. Very sleepy.

He heard the door slam. He curled up like a cat on the dark green carpet. It was a little cold. He felt his jacket being pulled off of him. His tie was loosened and removed, making him feel much more comfortable around his collar. As each article of clothing was taken off of him, he realized for the first time that he was wet.

In his underwear, Hirosue was pulled up to a higher place. Something was draped over his body, and he felt a sense of relief at its warmth. Something cold touched his cheek, and when he recognized that it was water, he clasped it with both hands. He brought it to his lips. The moisture hydrated his throat, and the haze in his head cleared a little. When he tried to take a second draught, his fingertips shook and he ended up spilling it.

"Geez, what are you doing?"

He heard scrambling footsteps. A towel wiped his mouth. Hirosue grabbed the hand that held it.

"What?"

His vision spun. He saw a blurry face that looked like Matsuoka's. He was sure it was Matsuoka's.

"...You said... you wouldn't come..." He was being resentful. "...You said you wouldn't..."

His fingers were shaken off.

"I wasn't planning to come. I was at home when I found you passed out drunk outside the convenience store. You were giving the store person a hard time, so I just brought you back to the hotel."

Matsuoka turned his back.

"Don't go!" Hirosue found himself yelling. His own voice reverberated in his head and made him feel nauseous. He clamped his hands over his ears.

"D-Don't go... please... but I'm sleepy. Once I sleep... I'll be... proper. So don't go. Don't go home. Once I sleep a bit, I'll talk..."

His drowsiness dragged him in. The nausea. The stinging in his chest. A black veil fell over his eyes, everything turned vague, and Hirosue lost consciousness as if abruptly falling over the edge.

The quiet sound of something being drawn—then, a bright light. He could see a human figure in the glare. After staring out the window for a while, the figure heaved a sigh and sank down against the wall across from the bed. He flung his legs out and pulled the ashtray full of towering butts towards him.

His shirt was wrinkled and his tie was loosened. A red-eyed Matsuoka was smoking in an absent-minded manner. But the next minute, he would rake his hand through his hair, scratch it

aggressively, and hang his head. The smoke from the cigarette between his fingers formed a thin thread as it drifted lazily to the ceiling.

When Hirosue moved, the bed creaked slightly. The man's bowed head slowly lifted at the sound. Hirosue lifted himself up as the man's eyes remained trained on him. The motion was enough to make his stomach churn. He had quite a bad hangover.

He sat on the bed and realized for the first time that he was only in his underwear. Yesterday, he had consumed some drinks at his usual *izakaya*, then gotten on the train. He felt like he had gone to a convenience store. He had no memories of what happened after that. Rain—he did feel like it had been raining.

He also didn't know why Matsuoka was in the room. The man had said he wouldn't come even after the party was over. He had refused to meet him, or to speak with him—because of that, Hirosue had drowned his sorrows in drink. But now, here the man was, right in front of him. Hirosue had no idea what was going on, but his desire to be alone with the man, to talk to him, had mysteriously come true. Although he felt sick, it was like a dream.

“—Oh, have a seat,” he said, pointing at the hotel chair.

“My legs'll get tired,” Matsuoka muttered, and pulled one knee up to his chest. “When you say you'll sleep for a little bit, Hirosue, do you mean all night?”

Hirosue sensed a sharpness in his words.

“Um, I... sorry, what are you talking about?”

Matsuoka knitted his eyebrows in displeasure.

“I have a vague feeling I went to the convenience store after drinking at the *izakaya*, but I don't remember. Did I say something?”

“Never mind,” Matsuoka said in exasperation, and bowed his head again. Had he said something last night in his drunkenness that would lower Matsuoka's opinion of him?

Seeing Matsuoka so clearly disappointed and fed up made Hirosue lose courage. But now was the chance to talk to him—now, when Matsuoka was tolerating his presence. There was no time to hesitate. He had asked Matsuoka to come because he wanted to talk, but he could not string together what he had wanted to say.

“I've been helping out at home after going back to my hometown.” He decided to start by talking about what he was doing at present. “It's pretty busy, but all the workers are family, so it's comfortable. Back when I used to work here, I used to get yelled at all the time, so... oh, but that was something I brought upon myself, so there was nothing I could do about that.”

There was not even a grunt in response from Matsuoka's bowed head.

“My older brother has three kids, and the oldest one likes me a lot. He's adorable. He's in second grade at primary school, and... he might be a little like you, Matsuoka. Anyway, I help out at home, but I don't get paid. My brother was saying he might be able to give me a small wage starting next month. It'd be about the same as a part-time student wage over here, but in the country, that's more than enough to get by.”

It looked like the sun was coming up. The angle of the sunlight streaming through the window gradually began to shift.

“I have a lot of friends back in the country,” Hirosue continued. “My best friend had his

wedding in May, and we were out drinking until morning. To tell you the truth, I hardly ever remember stuff that happened over here in the city anymore. But you were always on my mind, Matsuoka. I always wondered what you were up to."

"—So?"

The silent figure opened its mouth.

"I was on your mind. So?"

Hirosue could not respond when he was pressed for an answer like this. Matsuoka had been on his mind, which was why he wanted to meet—which was why he wanted to talk. But there was nothing beyond that. As he stalled, unable to say anything, Matsuoka roughly ran his right hand through his hair.

"Give me a break, will you?" he croaked. "Why won't you leave me alone? Do me a favour and don't associate with me just because you're getting sentimental—all this reminiscing, or remembering, or because I'm on your mind. Just don't. I'm begging you." He sounded like he was about to cry.

"For you, Hirosue, it always stops there. It starts with interest, and it never gets further than that."

He was right. Hirosue could say nothing back.

"Even if I were to invest in that interest and keep associating with you, it's going to end the same way again, isn't it? I'm just a friend that's on your mind, and that's all it's going to be. We're just going to repeat the same thing again. Please," Matsuoka pleaded, his voice barely audible. "Will you think about how I feel for once?"

Hirosue *had* thought about Matsuoka. But he had only thought of whether the man still loved him or not. He had never contemplated deeply about what Matsuoka had meant when he said he wanted nothing to do with Hirosue if they could only be friends.

Even when they had reunited after a long period apart, Matsuoka had refused to talk to him. Hirosue had been hurt by his cold attitude. He had thought Matsuoka hated him, and that he was sick of him, but perhaps Matsuoka was only doing this so he wouldn't get hurt—so he wouldn't harbour any expectations.

Silence wore on. Matsuoka lit a cigarette.

"Hirosue, I just don't think you're compatible with men on a fundamental level." His cigarette turned to ash in moments, and he dropped it into the ashtray. "You said so yourself. You don't plan to get into any kind of relationship with me. When I heard that, I knew that was your honest opinion. That's why I thought—fine, that'd be the end of that."

Matsuoka smiled wanly.

"Did you find a new girlfriend over there? If you did, you should hurry up and get married. Then I'll just be 'that guy who used to follow you around' and you'll forget all about me in no time."

If he got a girlfriend, if he got married—then, would he be able to forget about Matsuoka? Would he not remain in Hirosue's heart forever, like the innocent romance of his childhood friend whom he'd walked home with on the next morning after the wedding?

Hirosue remembered the words of his sister-in-law.

'If you were interested in her, you should have gotten married.'

Choosing a lifelong partner was an important thing; yet, in reality, "interest" was often enough

to seal the deal. As an example of that, Hirosue's older brother had suggested the hair stylist to him. Men and women did not need a reason to get married, and it was easy for them to do so. Yet, with a man, Hirosue found himself hesitating to step forward. No matter how earnestly Matsuoka professed his love, and despite the fact that Hirosue was interested in him, too, he was all-too-easily disregarded as an option.

What was the problem? Was it because men could not bear children? But there were many heterosexual couples who didn't have children. Was it societal pressure? But was he ever conscious about that?

No, that wasn't it. Love was feeling desire towards the other person. Although Hirosue felt the desire to meet and talk to Matsuoka, he did not feel the desire to have sex with him. In the past, he was supposed to have done, but he could still not imagine it.

Then, would the problem be solved if he could have sex with the man? If he could interact with the man in that way, would something change?

Hirosue went and stood in front of Matsuoka, who was sitting with his limbs carelessly thrown out. Maybe he could get over his physical repulsion towards certain parts once he got used to it. Hirosue bent down, steeled himself, and touched the man's chin. He felt a grittiness on his fingertips.

"...What?" Matsuoka said.

"So it's okay if I can do it?"

Matsuoka cocked his head.

"So if I can... sleep with you, it's okay?"

Matsuoka's face instantly paled, then gradually transformed into an expression of fury. Only when Hirosue saw this change up close and in detail did he realize the verbal slip he had made.

"—I don't believe this," Matsuoka growled quietly, violently jerking his chin away. The man made to leave the room, and the sight of his retreating back made Hirosue finally aware that he had just said something irreversible. He couldn't let the man just leave like this. Then, things would really be over. That much he was sure of, so Hirosue clung to the man from behind and prevented him from leaving.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry—" he implored.

"Let go of me!" Matsuoka struggled fiercely and relentlessly. But Hirosue was equally desperate to hold him back. While they grappled, they lost their balance, and Matsuoka fell heavily onto the floor. Hirosue clung to the man's waist and apologized profusely.

"Just like you said, Matsuoka, I can't draw the line with my emotions. But I can't stop thinking about you. I get the urge to see your face, and it hurts when you're cold to me. You're the only one who makes me feel this way. That's why—"

Matsuoka remained sitting on the floor and curled up into a ball.

"So what if you try it out because you're interested—and then what? If it's disgusting, are you just gonna say, 'Oh, it wasn't what I expected after all,' and leave me again?"

Matsuoka's rounded back was trembling.

"I won't."

"Liar!" Matsuoka spat as he turned away from him. "It's always been like that. Every time I try to give up, you say you might love me, make me expect something more—and then in the end you tell

me you can't do it after all. You tell me we can't be together because I'm a man. Pain isn't pleasure for me, you know. I'll be damned if I get dumped three times by the same guy."

Matsuoka was upset; the tip of his nose and his cheeks were red. His eyes were watery and glistening at the edges. He had never seen the man's face so raw with undisguised emotion. Hirosue wondered why he looked like this, and realized it was because of him.

He felt pity for the man, almost as if he were a bystander. And he was also filled with tenderness for him. Matsuoka was uncontrollably, irresistibly endearing. Hirosue reached out and tentatively touched the man's cheek. The sensation of soft and supple skin only lasted for a moment before his hand was ruthlessly slapped away. But Hirosue refused to back down. He stroked Matsuoka's cheek, touched his nose, rubbed his chin... then, grabbed those shoulders which were taut with tension and drew the man close.

Hirosue held the man in his arms. He did not treat him roughly. The man's back was slender against his fingertips, but it was also sinewy and hard. His hair and his suit smelled like cigarette smoke. Hirosue did not think that the person he was embracing was a woman.

This was Matsuoka, he thought.

They barely talked until eleven o'clock, when it was almost time for them to check out. Hirosue scrambled to get his stuff together and left the hotel. —Matsuoka was also with him, looking thoroughly exhausted.

Hirosue invited Matsuoka to an outdoor cafe nearby. He had actually wanted to go somewhere with a more relaxing atmosphere. But he was afraid that if he went all the way to the station, Matsuoka would leave him to go straight home. They chose seats in the shade. Hirosue ordered orange juice and Matsuoka ordered iced tea.

The cicadas buzzed. Matsuoka lazily put his lips to the straw in his iced tea. Hirosue wondered how to broach the topic of their future. He had stopped the man from leaving with no plan in mind at all. A question was tossed out at him.

"—So what is it that you want to do from here, Hirosue?"

Hirosue tightly laced his fingers together on the table. Even though there were certain aspects he could not bring himself to accept, he did feel like he had romantic feelings for the man. He was more certain that it might be love, more than the last time he had contemplated the possibility. But he was still not absolutely sure. If he asked Matsuoka to go out with him because he might love him, it would just be the same as last time. He knew painfully well how cruel it was to lead the man on. But he still wanted to see Matsuoka.

"—I'll come out to the city once in a while. I want you to see me when I do."

"No." Matsuoka's refusal carried no hint of indecision. "How much more of this do I have to put up with? I don't want to expect anything from you anymore, Hirosue."

His argument was understandable. But Hirosue did not want to give up.

"B—But it hurts that I can't see you." It took all of his effort to say that much. He felt frustrated at himself for being so awkward and clumsy at negotiation. Matsuoka fell silent. The sun's rays turned harsh, the shadows grew starker, and droplets of concentration formed on Matsuoka's glass of iced

tea. When they had completely dried, Matsuoka finally opened his mouth.

"Three months."

Hirosue lifted his face.

"For three months, starting today—I'll meet up with you if you happen to come down. But after that, if you feel like nothing has changed, I want this to be the end of it." After a slight pause, Matsuoka bowed his head. "Please end it," he repeated.

Considering how Matsuoka had previously refused to see him at all, perhaps a three-month grace period was a considerable concession.

"But in turn, I won't initiate contact at all," Matsuoka said. "I won't be able to see you on weekdays because I'm busy at work. I'll turn you down on my days off, too, if I'm busy. I won't prioritize you over anything."

Matsuoka's tone was stiff.

"—Also, I don't want you to touch me. I will absolutely not sleep with you to 'try it out'. Those are my conditions."

Hirosue had no choice but to accept them. To be honest, he did want to touch the man a little. He felt like his fingertips had finally begun to acknowledge Matsuoka. Now, he could perhaps touch him without an issue. But there was no way he could override the man if he had already said no.

Matsuoka heaved a long sigh before propping his elbows up on the table and resting his cheek on his hand. Maybe he was regretting giving him that grace period.

But there was no time to be hesitant about that now. Hirose only had three months. In order to gain a firm grasp of his vague feelings, he had no other way but to get to know the man.

"Did anything change after I went back?"

"Not really," Matsuoka murmured with his face down.

"What about work?"

"It's busy. A whole slew of people in senior positions quit. All the new people coming in are newbies who can't tell left from right. One of them got on the wrong side of a long-time client and ruined our contract. —Makes my head hurt."

Matsuoka abruptly lifted his head. "Oh, Fukuda quit."

"Huh?" Hirose found himself blurting. "Why? Did he get sick or something?"

Matsuoka gave a wry smile. "That would have been more respectable. No, he got fired because they found out he was embezzling money."

Hirosue was surprised. He knew Fukuda had very specific likes and dislikes with people, and was also prone to thrusting blame onto others. But he hadn't thought Fukuda to lack even such basic ethics.

"I guess they were sorting out financial matters properly since there were so many people leaving the company this year. That's probably when they found out. Apparently he'd been doing it constantly for the past three years, so that was a pretty nasty deed."

It had only been four months, yet so many things were changing. Their conversation lapsed. Hirose wondered what to say next as Matsuoka drained his lukewarm-looking iced tea. A waitress came around to the outdoor tables.

"Would you like anything else?" she asked as she took away Matsuoka's glass. Hirose

swallowed hard.

Matsuoka ordered another of the same thing. Hirosue was relieved; he had thought Matsuoka would go home after finishing his first drink, but he had ordered another one. That meant he would stay with him until he finished it.

Matsuoka fished out a cigarette from his jacket pocket and lit one. He pulled the ashtray towards him.

"You..." Hirosue began.

Matsuoka lifted his slightly-bowed head.

"You smoke a lot now, huh?"

"Well, yeah..."

"Did you always smoke that much?"

"I smoke more now than I used to. —There's been a lot to be stressed out about lately."

Seeing Matsuoka smoke made him want to try the same thing.

"Could I have one?"

Matsuoka looked surprised. "You smoke, too, Hirosue?"

"I only did a little bit after I started working."

Matsuoka opened his cigarette case and clicked his tongue. "Sorry. I'm out."

"The one you're smoking right now is fine. Can I just take a drag?"

Matsuoka gave him a slow blink, then stared at the cigarette between his fingers. The ashes fell onto the table.

"I mean—but if you don't want to, that's fine," Hirosue added.

"I don't mind."

Hirosue took the offered cigarette and took a drag. He choked before he could taste anything, and he curled up hacking. When his coughing finally settled down, he lifted his face to see Matsuoka laughing.

"—No need for you to laugh," Hirosue grumbled.

Matsuoka's shoulders still shook from his mirth. "No, it's just... I haven't seen that in a while. It reminded me of when I first smoked in high school."

"High school? That means you were a minor," Hirosue said disapprovingly.

"Everyone tries it out around that time," Matsuoka said, looking unruffled.

"I didn't start until I was of age."

"You're so straight-laced," Matsuoka laughed again. Hirosue felt sullen for being ridiculed, but at least Matsuoka was smiling. That was a good sign. He passed the cigarette back.

"You finished already?" Matsuoka teased, then slowly brought it to his lips. There was something so sensual about his lips around the cigarette that Hirosue unwittingly averted his gaze.

"You don't have to do things that don't suit you," Matsuoka murmured. "You don't fit the image of the bitter, world-weary type who'd smoke up, anyway."

Matsuoka smoked his last cigarette until it was a small stub. He took out his portable ashtray from his jacket pocket, and threw the butt inside. Hirosue wondered why he would put it in there when there was an ashtray on the table.

The buzzing of the cicadas grew louder.

"It's so hot..." Matsuoka grumbled, wiping the sweat off of his forehead with the back of his hand. Hirosue thrust his hand inside his pocket. He could feel a handkerchief. When he pulled it out, it was very wrinkly and creased in strange places. It wasn't the most hygienic-looking, but at least it was laundered.

"Here."

When he offered it to Matsuoka, the man tilted his head.

"What?"

"I know it's wrinkly, but it's washed. And I haven't used it."

Matsuoka was staring intently at the handkerchief. Soon, Hirosue began to feel embarrassed at having offered such an unattractive-looking article. Just as he tried to withdraw his hand, Matsuoka stuck his own out.

"Let me borrow that." He refolded the handkerchief into a square, wiped his forehead, and put it down by his hand. Then, he looked at his watch. The gesture filled Hirosue with dread. He wondered if Matsuoka would say he was going home.

Matsuoka looked at Hirosue, then opened his mouth to speak.

"...I'm kind of hungry. Can I eat something?"

They ended up whiling the time away at the cafe until four o'clock. Even after he finished eating and the sun began to lean towards the west, Matsuoka still did not say he was going home. He spoke in short fragmented bursts about his current life, but he did not mention a word about anything serious.

Even when the hour approached for his scheduled bullet train, Hirosue still wanted to be with Matsuoka. But he was also concerned about the time. Matsuoka seemed to notice him glancing at his watch often.

"What time do you have to head home?" he asked.

"Around five, I think."

"Shouldn't you be on your way soon?"

At the man's words, Hirosue reluctantly stood from his seat. Although he had said he would pick up the tab, Matsuoka still paid for his portion in full.

"Say, whereabouts did you move to?" Hirosue asked once they left the cafe. Matsuoka widened his eyes in surprise.

"How did you know I moved?"

"I went to your house once, but there was someone else living there."

"Oh, I see," Matsuoka murmured quietly, then told him where his new condo was. It was a little east of Tokyo Station.

"I'm actually getting on the bullet train from Tokyo station. Let's go to the area together," Hirosue suggested, and Matsuoka was steered into a walk by his urging.

They boarded on a JR⁹ line so they wouldn't have to transfer trains. Their trip wasn't long, but they decided to sit since there were open seats. Matsuoka left a little bit of distance between them

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when he sat down.

He stuck his fingers in his breast pocket and rummaged around. Then, he clicked his tongue softly.

"Cigarettes?" Hirosue asked.

"I forgot I was out of them. Well, it's not like I can smoke in the train, anyway." Matsuoka let out a long, thin sigh.

"The one I smoked at the cafe was your last one."

"Yup. The one you choked on."

When Hirosue fell silent, Matsuoka snickered. Back there, he had only forgotten the trick to it because he hadn't smoked in a while. If he'd had one or two more puffs....

Wait a minute, he realized. Why had Matsuoka taken the trouble to put the last cigarette butt in his portable ashtray? Could it possibly be because Hirosue had smoked it—because he had put his mouth on it? Was that why Matsuoka had put it in the ashtray that he carried around instead of throwing it away?

Or he could simply have put it in his portable ashtray out of his usual habit. But Matsuoka had thrown out all the other cigarettes he had smoked into the ashtray on the table. But the one Hirosue had smoked, that was the only one that he—Hirosue felt his face suddenly burn as if it were set on fire. He could feel the flush reach his ears, and he pressed his right hand to his face. That cigarette, that butt which he had indirectly kissed—he hadn't confirmed with Matsuoka yet, but he was sure he wasn't mistaken in thinking so.

Matsuoka was adorable. Maybe it was the wrong word to use, but the man sitting in a daze beside him was so pitifully endearing, it made him tremble.

"What's wrong? Are you feeling sick?" the man said to him. Hirosue hastily shook his head. "Your face is red. Maybe you're starting to get a fever. You did get wet in the rain last night, maybe that's why..."

The man leaned in to peer at his face from below. The man's proximity made Hirosue blush even more with nervousness.

"I-I'm fine," Hirosue stammered, shrinking back. Matsuoka's face stiffened as he quietly drew away. Hirosue felt like his avoidance had hurt the man.

"Oh—it's not like I didn't want you near me, or anything—"

"Doesn't matter," Matsuoka said with a shrug. "It doesn't bother me."

Was that true? Before, he would have taken Matsuoka's word for it. It made things easier for him. But now, he was curious about Matsuoka's feelings, especially because he knew that Matsuoka was kind and always took care not to hurt people's feelings.

Hirosue had reacted that way not because he was repulsed, but because he thought Matsuoka was cute. In the end, however, he could not bring himself to say so. If he did, he would only lead the man on. *But if I'm going to make him feel bad because of a misunderstanding, maybe I should just come out and say it, I mean, it's true, after all... but then...* His thoughts ran around in circles, and as always, he ended up sealing his lips.

He had vague memories of yesterday, when he had gotten wet in the rain outside the convenience store. If Matsuoka hadn't picked him up, he would perhaps have gotten drenched and

caught a cold. Now that he gave it proper thought, he realized Matsuoka's new condo was in the opposite direction from his old one. Then, for what reason would he have walked down that road if it wasn't to visit Hirosue at his hotel?

Matsuoka said he had decided to bring Hirosue back to his hotel because he happened to cross his path. But perhaps he had actually come to see him. Matsuoka had claimed he didn't want to see him, and that he wanted to be left alone, but there was always a part of him that didn't follow through with it. If Hirosue told him he wanted to meet, the man still did.

Hirosue threw a furtive glance at the man beside him. Matsuoka was gazing at the hanging advertisement in the train. His lips were slightly parted and he looked dazed. Hirosue was seized with an impulse to kiss him, and he was confused at himself for feeling that way. His heart stirred fitfully, and although he wanted to look at Matsuoka's face, he found he could not.

It was almost as if he were in love. Had Matsuoka always been this way? Perhaps he had been sending these nonverbal signals all along, as well as verbal ones, and Hirosue had just been too dense to sense them. How many of these signs had he missed in the past?

They arrived at Tokyo Station before Hirosue could calm his heart and mind. Matsuoka said he would transfer to another train from here. Hirosue only had to walk through the station to get to his bullet train platform.

But he did not want them to part here like this. He felt like the distance would make him lose his grasp on the emotions he had just begun to understand.

"Well, I have to go that way, so," said Matsuoka.

"Wait," Hirosue said, stopping him. He still had at least thirty minutes until his bullet train arrived.

"You haven't told me your cell number or e-mail address yet."

"Oh," Matsuoka murmured. "I'll e-mail you later."

"Tell me now."

Matsuoka let out a small exhale as if in exasperation, then took his phone out.

"Do you want to do it through infrared? It's faster."

"I—um, sorry. I don't really know how to."

"Give me your phone."

Matsuoka opened Hirosue's phone and fiddled with it. All Hirosue did was stand still and watch, even though it was his phone.

"I think it's saved."

His phone was returned to him.

"Try e-mailing me just in case," Hirosue insisted.

"Is that you, Matsuoka?"

The two of them turned around at the familiar voice. Hayama was standing a little way off. Beside her was her husband, whom they had seen at the wedding. Hayama left her husband's side and jogged over to them.

"Hirosue, you, too! What a coincidence!" Hayama appeared a little excited. Matsuoka threw a glance at her husband, who was standing in the distance behind her.

"Is that your husband over there?"

"Yeah. We're just about to head off on our honeymoon. It's a late train."

"Where's all your stuff?"

"We've had our luggage taken in advance."

"I see," Matsuoka replied. "Where are you going again? I think you mentioned it before."

"Ten days in England," Hayama said happily.

"Lucky you," Matsuoka said. "I have a friend who's been there before. Apparently the lakes are really beautiful?"

"Seems like it. I'm so excited," Hayama said, before her eyes were directed at Hirose.

"Hirose, thanks for coming out such a long way for my wedding."

"It was a great wedding," was all he could say, a typical and worn-out phrase compared to Matsuoka's skilful small talk.

"So it looks like you two have made up," Hayama observed. "That's good."

"Made up?"

"Hayama, what about your train?" Matsuoka interrupted over Hirose.

"Oh, yeah."

"Your husband might get jealous if you keep chatting with two studs like us."

"Oh, come on," Hayama laughed, giving Matsuoka's shoulder a slap. "I'll be in touch again when I come back. See you."

Hayama returned to her husband's side. She turned around once to wave to them, but she quickly became invisible in the throng of people.

"What did she mean by us making up?" Hirose asked, but Matsuoka did not answer.

"I'll be on my way, then," he said as he made to leave.

"You haven't answered me yet." Hirose grabbed Matsuoka's arm. The man's whole body flinched.

"I told you not to touch me!" he yelled.

Startled by his voice, Hirose let go. Some passersby turned around to give them a glance. Matsuoka brought his right hand to his forehead.

"When you went back to the country, Hayama asked me if I was still keeping in touch with you. I couldn't tell her I was dumped, so I lied and said we got into a fight. She kept saying how sorry she was because we seemed to get along so well, and she kept asking me a bunch of questions. So I told her we fought over something stupid and we didn't have the chance to make up."

Matsuoka let out a shaky breath.

"I didn't expect you to be at the wedding, much less be in the seat right beside me. It was a white lie that I told in the moment. I didn't think Hayama would go so far to set things up for us like that."

Hirose had found it odd when he was invited to Hayama's wedding, but now that he knew the chain of events behind it, it made sense.

"I know you hate it when people lie, Hirose, but..." Matsuoka's whole body was shaking—his bowed head, his clenched fists, and his shoulders. He looked like a scolded child, and it was adorable. Maybe to other people, he looked like a tall and handsome man, but "cute" was the only word Hirose could describe him with.

Matsuoka slowly lifted his head.

“—Don’t you need to get going for your bullet train?”

It was almost departure time, but Hirosue wanted to stay with Matsuoka, to talk to him a little longer. Perhaps he could stay an extra day? But he had already bought his return ticket. If he didn’t get on the next bullet train, he would miss his transfer for the last train on the local line. And on Monday, he had work to help out with back home.

“Wait here.”

Hirosue ran to the ticket stands, bought an entrance ticket, and gave it to Matsuoka.

“What’s this?”

“Come to the train platform with me.”

“But you barely have fifteen minutes.”

“That’s okay.”

Matsuoka did not refuse. They went through the bullet train ticket gates and emerged onto the platform. They had ten minutes until the train arrived. Several long lines were already formed at the boarding points.

He had brought Matsuoka with him because he wanted the man’s company, but he was unable to speak. Was it okay to say he loved him? Or was he just under the impression that he was in love? If he spoke while he was still unsure, he would only hurt Matsuoka. That was why he hesitated to take the leap. That was why he could not say out loud that he thought Matsuoka was cute. He could not say that he wanted to be with him.

He wished the train wouldn’t come, but there it was, pulling into the station. People began boarding. Hirosue let the person behind him get on, and stood face-to-face with Matsuoka.

“Did you keep it because I smoked it?”

Matsuoka gave him a quizzical look.

“The last cigarette that you smoked at the cafe.”

Matsuoka’s face suddenly twisted as if he were about to cry, and his lips began to tremble. His face was honest; he was never able to lie. The bell rang, urging passengers to board quickly, and Hirosue looked around him. There was no one else left apart from the two of them. He needed to get on, but he could not leave the man behind. Before he knew it, Hirosue had grabbed Matsuoka’s arm and jumped onto the train. The doors closed.

“Oh—”

The bullet train slowly lurched into motion.

“Wh—What the hell am I supposed to do now?” Matsuoka demanded. “I don’t have a ticket.”

Hirosue could not explain his own impulse, either, in the face of Matsuoka’s reproach. “I—I just couldn’t leave you behind.”

“What kind of reason is that?”

Matsuoka pressed his hand to his forehead and sighed. “And my shoe...”

Hirosue looked down at his feet and saw that Matsuoka was only wearing a sock on his right foot.

“Weren’t you wearing both shoes?”

“Of course I was wearing both shoes,” Matsuoka retorted. “One came off when I got on!”

The station grew smaller and smaller into the distance, with Matsuoka's shoe left abandoned on the platform. Hirosue had dragged the man onto the train without a ticket, and now he was also without a shoe. As Hirosue gazed at Matsuoka's forlorn socked foot, he vividly recalled a memory from long ago.

"When we first met..." Hirosue spoke. "You weren't wearing shoes. I wondered what happened to you, and I couldn't stop thinking about it... that's why I doubled back and lent you mine. I remember how cute you looked, wearing my shoes that were way too big."

That day, he had fallen in love with Yoko Eto. Right now, an impulse much stronger than that was stirring him to action. Hirosue took off his own shoe, knelt down, and put it on Matsuoka's right foot. It was two sizes smaller than Hirosue's, and left a gap in the heel of the shoe.

"—Yesterday, I was actually going to go home," he heard a voice say above his head. "When I found you at the convenience store, I ignored you at first. I thought you were the worst, telling me to come and not showing up yourself. But I went to the station and... I just couldn't get on the train, so I came back. It was raining, but you were under the eaves, anyway, and I figured the convenience store staff would do something about it. So I kept watching from the other side of the street..."

Then, Matsuoka, unable to leave him behind, had taken an unconscious Hirosue to the hotel and stayed with him until morning.

"Are you getting off at the next station?" Hirosue asked.

Matsuoka nodded.

"I don't want you to."

An expression of hesitation crossed Matsuoka's face. "Well, there's nothing I can do. I don't have a ticket."

"I'll buy the ticket."

"What are you being so stubborn about? I told you I would see you when you come down."

"I want you to ride the train with me to my station." When Hirosue took his arm, he could feel Matsuoka shaking.

"I can't just... I mean... I have work tomorrow."

Hirosue wanted to be with him, to touch him. It was almost like he was in love. What other name could it have, if it wasn't love?

Hirosue touched the man's chin, where a faint stubble remained. This sandy texture was Matsuoka's. Hirosue could no longer remember what he had found so repulsive about it.

His heart surged with emotion, and the air around him seemed to change colour. His eyes were fixed; he couldn't take them off the man; it began to feel warm where they touched, and all the sounds around them seemed to vanish. He wasn't exaggerating; the man before him became his entire world.

Hirosue bought Matsuoka's ticket in the train car. Matsuoka had to go to work the next day, which meant as soon as he arrived at Hirosue's station, he would have to promptly head back the way he came. He insisted that the ticket was a waste of money, but Hirosue didn't mind as long as they could be together.

They sat side-by-side in their reserved seats. They barely spoke throughout the two-hour trip.

Matsuoka stared out the window for the whole time. But just watching his profile, just knowing that he was beside him, made Hirosue feel like he was fulfilled.

Once they got off the bullet train, Matsuoka gazed inquisitively at his surroundings.

"I've never been around this area," he said. Then, he perused the schedule for the train going back. Just seeing him do that made Hirosue's chest ache. He wondered if Matsuoka was in a hurry to get home. Even though he knew the man had work the next day, Hirosue still wondered if he was the only one who wanted to spend time together.

"Are there any shoe stores around here?" Matsuoka turned to him and asked. Hirosue didn't know much about this station, either, since it was only a transfer point for him. He paused to think for a while.

"I think there was a department store close to the station."

"Maybe there'll be a shoe store inside, then. Would I be able to see it as soon as I get out?"

"I'll go with you," Hirosue offered.

"But—" Matsuoka looked at his feet. "I'm wearing one of your shoes."

"It's alright. I have socks on."

Despite his protests, Hirosue ended up being left behind on the waiting room bench. His last transfer to the local line was leaving in about ten minutes. As he expected, Matsuoka was still gone when the train eventually left. But he had never intended to get on. From the moment he had bought Matsuoka's train ticket, Hirosue had intended to stay with him right up until the man's return train left for the city.

Hirosue started to feel somewhat lonely by himself. He kept his eyes trained on the station entrance, wondering if Matsuoka would come back soon. When Matsuoka returned about twenty minutes later, he was wearing a pair of dark sneakers on his feet.

The shoe he had lent out also came back to him. He saw Matsuoka look up at the train schedule again.

"Do you feel like going out to eat?" Hirosue suggested hastily.

"I don't mind, but don't you have a train to catch? You still have a while to go from here, don't you?"

"I'm alright," Hirosue lied.

"I guess I am a bit hungry," Matsuoka murmured, looking apprehensive nevertheless. They agreed they didn't want to roam too much in an unfamiliar area, so they went into an *izakaya* close to the station. It was crowded inside, no doubt due to its good location and perhaps the hour of the day. They were shown to counter seats.

Here, they also barely talked. But Hirosue was still satisfied. He was happy enough just to have the man with him, to watch the man eat out of the corner of his eye.

When it passed eight o'clock, Matsuoka broached the topic again. "It's getting late," he began, "I think we should be going soon. I have my bullet train to catch, too."

"Oh, but..."

"I don't want to wait until the last minute and have to make a run for the train."

Hirosue's attempt to stop him was unsuccessful, and they left the *izakaya* together. Matsuoka once again refused to let Hirosue pay for the bill. They had gone into the restaurant with the light of

the setting sun lingering about them, but now it was pitch dark outside. It was hot and humid in contrast to the air-conditioned restaurant. Matsuoka pulled off his tie as he walked, rolled it up, and stuck it in his pocket. They could see the station right before them.

"Are you really going back?" Hirosue asked.

"Yeah," Matsuoka answered. "I have work tomorrow. You're going home, too, aren't you?"

"I'm thinking of staying overnight somewhere close by."

Matsuoka's face tensed slightly.

"The local lines aren't running anymore," Hirosue added.

"Back there you said you were alright with the time," Matsuoka said accusingly.

"Yeah, well... the last train was already gone by that time, so."

Matsuoka stopped dead in the middle of the road.

"I *knew* something was off," he said in frustration. "You were too relaxed for someone who had to transfer trains. You must have missed your chance to go home because I was buying my shoes. I'm right, aren't I? Then you should have told me. You didn't have to wait for me. I could have gone on barefoot to buy shoes if I had to."

Hirosue remained silent.

"Will you say something?" Matsuoka demanded, his hackles raised angrily. "I don't know what the hell is up with you today, Hirosue. Putting me on the train when I don't have a ticket, bringing me all the way over here. I came because you insisted on it, but it's not normal, you know, taking a bullet train all the way here just to U-turn and go back."

Intimidated by Matsuoka's outburst, Hirosue lost his ability to speak. Matsuoka pursed his lips into an angry line before aggressively scratching his head.

"What is it that you want to do, Hirosue?"

It was a question Matsuoka had uttered many times before.

"You've brought me here, kept me from leaving—what do you want to do? You say you're going to stay the night here. Does that mean you want me to stay, too?"

"Oh, um, if you can." In the end, he had ended up making Matsuoka say everything.

"But I told you, didn't I? I have work tomorrow. Time-wise, I could probably make it back on the first bullet train in the morning, but I don't know if I'd be able to change. So I can't stay here overnight."

"I know, but..."

"If you know, then I'm going home, alright?"

Hirosue could not give his assent. If he did, Matsuoka would go home. A look of irritation remained on Matsuoka's face as he glanced at his watch, then directed his gaze at the station. They had less than ten minutes until the last bullet train left.

"If you want to say something, spit it out. Don't just clam up because you're scared of how I'll react."

Matsuoka's impatience forced Hirosue to open his mouth and speak.

"I—I think I love you."

Matsuoka whirled around to look at him.

"Oh, I mean, not 'think'. Um—I love you."

"What... the hell was that?" Matsuoka's lips trembled as he wore a look of disbelief.

"I wasn't sure before," Hirosue continued. "But when I met with you again, I felt like this must be it."

"Why the hell are you saying this *now*?" He could see Matsuoka clench his fists hard. "I knew something was off ever since you put me on the train. You'd touch me even though I told you not to, and you kept staring at me. I wondered if that might be it, but if I let my hopes up too much I'd feel worse when I was wrong, so I tried not to think about it. Anyway, enough about me. That doesn't matter. But you had all this time in the bullet train, and in the *izakaya*. Why are you saying this now? You're being unfair."

Hirosue had no idea why he was being called unfair.

"Besides, all I've been doing is telling you to go away or that I don't want to see you. Why would that make you say you love me?"

Matsuoka's voice was loud, and other passersby turned around to look at them. They were clearly drawing attention to themselves, arguing in the middle of the sidewalk in front of the station like this. Hirosue took Matsuoka by the arm and moved to the edge of the sidewalk. Matsuoka's lips were pursed firmly, and his head was down.

"And... so..." Hirosue continued. "It's going to be long-distance, but I want you to go out with me."

Matsuoka did not answer him. Hirosue began to feel anxious at the lack of a response.

"I'll come to visit you as much as I can on my days off," he insisted. "I'll call and e-mail you every day."

Matsuoka lifted his face. Hirosue was surprised: the man looked like he was about to cry.

"Why?" Matsuoka demanded, grabbing the front of Hirosue's shirt and looking ready to throw a punch at him. "I haven't done anything. I'm not trying hard like I used to. Ever since we stopped seeing each other, all I've been doing is trying to forget about you."

"Then I'm glad I found out how I feel before you really forgot me."

The strength left Matsuoka's fingertips, but he still looked like he was on the verge of tears. Hirosue gently stroked Matsuoka's head.

"You said you didn't try, but I think it's because you loved me all this time that I was able to realize how I feel. It's—it's hard to explain, but..."

Matsuoka pressed his palm to his forehead.

"Can I sit down somewhere?" he said quietly. They took a seat on the bench at the bus stop in front of them. There was no one there since the last bus had left.

Hirosue watched Matsuoka attentively as he sat cradling his head. After a while, he heard a soft "oh" as Matsuoka lifted his face.

"My last bullet train..."

It was long gone. Matsuoka glanced around in a panic like a child who had been left behind. After some moments he seemed to calm down, for he lowered his head and exhaled weakly, wearing an expression of resignation.

"Do you really love me?" Matsuoka said quietly, without looking at Hirosue.

"Yeah."

"I see," Matsuoka murmured. He said nothing more.

They stayed at the bus stop for about an hour before he and Matsuoka began to look for the day's lodgings. Since the information kiosk at the station was closed, they went to a business hotel nearby instead, only to find out that there were no vacancies. They tried the other hotel that was in the vicinity, but it was also full. Hirosue wondered how there could be no vacant rooms on a Sunday night. The man at the front desk informed him that there was an outdoor concert going on at a baseball stadium nearby.

"There aren't many hotels around here, so when events are going on it's usually like this," he said.

Their timing was so astoundingly bad, it was enough to make one dizzy. Matsuoka had apparently been listening in beside him, for he spoke up once they exited the hotel.

"We could go into a *manga* cafe¹⁰ or something," he said with a shrug. They could even afford to sleep outside, since it was summertime, but Hirosue figured it would be physically straining. Another option was kill time at a twenty-four-hour family restaurant, but in that case, a *manga* cafe would be better in the sense that they wouldn't feel guilty about overstaying. Hirosue felt apologetic. In a childish fit, he had kept the man from going, yet he could not even give Matsuoka a hotel to stay in for the night.

They started out by heading from the station to the shopping district in search of a *manga* cafe. Since Hirosue did not know the town well, he headed in a direction where the lights were most concentrated. On the way, Matsuoka bought a pack of cigarettes from a vending machine in front of a convenience store. It looked like he could not do without them.

Soon, the colour of the neon signs around them began to change. Hirosue tilted his head in perplexity until he soon realized that they had wandered into the love hotel district.

When he hastily made to turn into another street, he heard a voice beside him.

"I don't mind going into a love hotel."

Hirosue felt his heart skip a beat.

"Yeah, but..." He was a little hesitant at the suggestive air of a love hotel, but when he thought of how Matsuoka had spent the night before on the hotel floor, he wanted to let the man sleep in a bed tonight.

"You're right." Hirosue smiled brightly to ward off any lewd implications. "I guess it doesn't really matter where we go if we're just going to sleep."

"Are you sure you just want to sleep?" Matsuoka asked.

"Um... yeah."

"You don't want to have sex with me or anything, Hirosue?" Matsuoka said in a penetrating way, looking him in the eye. Hirosue felt his face burn.

"But... um..." The words faltered on his lips. To be honest, he did want to try it. He wanted to

10 A manga cafe is like a cross between a cafe and reading room. Drinks and light meals are served, and the customer can pay per hour or buy an all-night package. Many cafes offer booths/rooms for longer stays, as well as amenities like showers.

try and touch the man. But to say that now, in this situation, seemed all too materialistic. He felt like Matsuoka would think he had made him stay behind for this purpose.

"Um... but I'm sure you're tired today, so..." he made a feeble attempt to regain his footing.

"I don't mind doing it," said Matsuoka, dropping a verbal bomb. Hirosue swallowed hard.

"But..."

"I want you to decide what we're going to do, right here, right now. —I need to mentally prepare, too."

He had dragged Matsuoka around for the whole day today—no, since yesterday. The man was probably quite exhausted. But.... His pulse thudded almost painfully in his ears, and a sheen of sweat appeared on his forehead. He felt lightheaded as if he were drunk, and he almost fell over. When he hastily took a deep breath, he felt his emotions settle into place.

Hirosue set his mind and took Matsuoka's right hand.

"Is there anything I need to get?"

Matsuoka tilted his head.

"Anything we'd need to do it. —I'm not very well-versed."

Matsuoka's face flushed slightly. "I'm sure a love hotel will have almost everything," he said.

Hirosue walked down the hotel district, still holding Matsuoka's hand, and entered the closest love hotel. It had one vacant room, so they decided on that.

The room was sleekly co-ordinated with cream-coloured walls and dark brown furniture. There was nothing visibly erotic—other than the one large bed in the middle of the room.

"I haven't been in a love hotel in ages. It's nice. Looks like a business hotel."

Matsuoka sat down on the bed. Hirosue stood frozen at the entrance with nervousness.

Matsuoka paid no mind to him as he opened the cabinets, checked inside the drawers, and otherwise explored various parts of the room. After he had completed a round of that, he asked, "Can I take a shower first?"

"Um... sure," Hirosue answered.

Matsuoka disappeared into the bathroom. Hirosue cautiously approached the bed and perched on it like a guest. He was excessively rattled and restless. Even his fingertips were shaking. Fifteen minutes, twenty... after thirty minutes had passed, even he began to feel concerned that Matsuoka was taking too long. But he hesitated to speak up. He felt like if he did, the man would think he was overly eager to have sex.

He was still immersed in his thoughts when Matsuoka finally came out. Hirosue slipped past the man and half-fled into the bathroom, careful not to make eye contact. He couldn't bring himself to look straight at the man, who looked alluring fresh out of his bath. Matsuoka had left the tub filled with warm water for him, but Hirosue only took a shower before exiting the bathroom. He reckoned a bathrobe was enough, but since Matsuoka had put all of his clothes back on after taking his shower, Hirosue also decided to wear his clothes as well.

Matsuoka was lying on his back on the bed. Hirosue had a feeling he had fallen asleep. He decided to blow-dry his hair for the time being. But even after he came back, Matsuoka did not so much as twitch. Hirosue cautiously climbed on the bed and crawled towards Matsuoka. When he peered into the man's face, he saw that Matsuoka's breathing was slow and regular.

His slumbering face was beautiful.

"Are you asleep?" he whispered. Matsuoka's closed eyes opened slowly, startling Hirosue.

"No."

"Are you sleepy?"

"Not really." Matsuoka covered his face with his hands. "—When I was in the shower, I kept thinking you were going to leave."

"Why?"

There was no answer to his inquiry. As they gazed into each other's eyes, Hirosue felt a bittersweet and sensual impulse stir within him.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked, stroking Matsuoka's cheek.

"Would you stop if I said no?"

Maybe he doesn't want to kiss, Hirosue thought hesitantly as he looked down. Matsuoka propped himself up a little and kissed him first. His lips were soft, hot, and dizzying.

They exchanged kisses as they took off each other's clothes. Hirosue unbuttoned and opened Matsuoka's shirt, exposing his thin, flat chest and his small nipples. They were the same parts as his own, yet Matsuoka's definitely exuded an erotic allure.

They were so small, he had no idea to do with them. Hirosue gently touched it with his palm, but the sensation was too slight to grasp, so he tried pinching the blushing bud with his fingers. A breathy whimper rang in his ears, sending a shiver up his spine.

When he rubbed it with the flat of his finger, the undetectable bud darkened and hardened into a point. As if mesmerized, Hirosue kissed it and wrapped his lips around it. Matsuoka's thin chest rose and fell in large motions, and he could hear him emit small gasps. His voice was so arousing, Hirosue sucked his nipples over and over.

Their bodies were practically pressed up against each other, and Hirosue could feel the other man's arousal directly through the fabric. Matsuoka was probably aware of Hirosue's desire as well, which was embarrassing, but in that sense they were equally guilty.

He was curious to see the part which showed the man's arousal so honestly—the desire came naturally to him. But when Matsuoka noticed Hirosue's hand on his boxers, he resisted so vehemently that Hirosue hesitated.

"I don't want to take my bottoms off," Matsuoka said flatly.

"Why not?"

Matsuoka looked down. "I don't want you to see."

"But I want to see."

"It looks the same as yours."

It was hard to get any more blunt than that.

"Yeah, but I want to see what yours looks like, Matsuoka."

"You'll just get disgusted." Matsuoka was stubborn.

"—Then just show me a little bit. If I feel like I can't handle it, I won't take them off." Matsuoka resisted, but Hirosue managed to reason with him and pull his boxers down. It was his first time

seeing someone else in this state. It was very vivid and was even somewhat formidable. He felt no disgust. And, although he knew he was a horrible person for feeling this way, he was strongly aroused by the sight of Matsuoka, embarrassed and covering his face with his hands so he wouldn't be seen.

Hirosue soothed Matsuoka and took off his underwear. His penis, freed from its restrictive cloth confines, was already half-erect. Matsuoka was adorable, with his head bowed and his blush reaching up to his neck. And so was his member, which showed its pleasure honestly. When Hirose touched it, he was startled at how hot and hard it felt.

"D-Don't touch it!" Matsuoka grabbed Hirose's wrist. "Don't feel like you have to do me any favours."

"I want to touch it," Hirose insisted. "Just seeing it like this is—overwhelming."

Although Matsuoka resisted, Hirose touched his member anyway. He rubbed it slowly like he did with his own, and watched it swell before his eyes. Matsuoka's spine shuddered. Hirose only had to stroke it a little before it completely took shape—then, he tightened his grip slightly.

Matsuoka cried out.

"Sorry, did it hurt?" Hirose hastily withdrew his hand. Matsuoka covered his mouth with his hands.

"I'm sorry for holding it too tight," Hirose apologized hesitantly. "It's hard to get the hang of it."

"It didn't hurt."

"But..."

"It really didn't hurt. I was just a little surprised. —I think I feel worse when you're leaving me hanging like that."

Encouraged by his words, Hirose closed his hand once again around the man's engorged penis. Despite insisting that it didn't hurt, Matsuoka kept inching away from him, so Hirose slid his opposite hand behind his back to support him. When he used that hand to pull the man close, Matsuoka hesitantly circled his arms around Hirose's neck.

Matsuoka's ecstatic gasps touched Hirose's ear as he continued to slide his hand up the man's member. His moans gradually became more tense.

"Let go, I'm almost coming," Matsuoka said breathlessly.

"Go ahead."

"I don't want to."

"Just do it."

"No. I don't want to get your hand dirty."

Although Matsuoka kept telling him to let go, Hirose did not listen. Matsuoka released his heat into Hirose's palm, drenching his hand.

"I *told* you to let go. You think it's gross, don't you?" Matsuoka looked on the verge of tears. Hirose found his expression so seductive that he drew the man close and kissed him. He continued kissing the man as he slowly pushed him down onto his back.

Even a socially ignorant man like him had a little knowledge of how men had sex with each other. He had done it once, though he had no memory of it. But he had been drunk that first time, and to be honest, he wasn't sure of the proper steps. He wondered if he should loosen it up a little, like

with women, and he reached to touch Matsuoka's nether part. He felt Matsuoka's body instantly seize up under his.

"You don't like being touched here?"

"I don't mind," Matsuoka said quietly, and implored, "but I want you to use gel."

Hirosue did as he was told and used the lubricating gel that came with the hotel. But even with that, the body pinned beneath him stiffened as soon as he laid a finger on the tender-looking opening. They were both men, after all; perhaps Matsuoka had an aversion to this kind of act. Hiro sue withdrew his hands.

"You can go ahead," Matsuoka said.

"Huh?"

"Do what you like with me, Hiro sue."

Hirosue was still concerned about Matsuoka's reaction.

"Are you sure you want to do it?"

"It kind of hurt the last time I did it, so I think my body just does that on its own. It's not like it actually hurts now."

The last time I did it. The sentence scratched Hiro sue's chest like a fingernail. He could not hide his jealousy, and his question came out in an accusing tone.

"Last time? With who?"

Matsuoka widened his eyes in astonishment. Then, his face crumpled as if he were about to cry.

"With who..." he said in a raspy voice. Suddenly, Hiro sue remembered.

"Oh... with me..."

Matsuoka shoved Hiro sue away and curled up on his stomach. His head and back trembled.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Hiro sue gently embraced Matsuoka, who had started crying. "I'm so sorry."

Hirosue barely remembered the one time they had had sex before; that was why it didn't really sink in for him that he had already done it once with Matsuoka. But he could see from Matsuoka's reaction that the way he had done it was far from decent. His touch was enough to make Matsuoka's body shrink back in fear—that was how painful and unpleasant his experience had been. And Hiro sue had done this to him.

"I'll never do such horrible things to you again." He gently ran his hand over the man's head. "I promise I never will."

He stroked the man's trembling body and embraced him from behind.

"I'll be good to you," Hiro sue said, his lips against Matsuoka's neck. There was no answer. No answer—but Matsuoka twisted around, entwined his arms around Hiro sue's neck, and hugged him tightly.

Hirosue woke up to see the bedside lamp turned on. In the soft pool of light near his head, Matsuoka was lying on his stomach smoking a cigarette. Enticed by his languid expression, Hiro sue reached out and gently ran his hand along the man's shoulder. Matsuoka flinched.

"It's rude smoking in bed, isn't it?" Matsuoka said, putting his butt out in the ashtray. "I couldn't help it."

When Hirosue drew him close to kiss him, Matsuoka squirmed away.

"I smell like smoke right now," he protested.

Hirosue chased the reluctant man and kissed him. It was true; it tasted a little bitter inside Matsuoka's mouth, but it became sweeter the more they kissed.

He remembered how it felt like squeezing into Matsuoka. He had taken his time to loosen the man up, and had carefully inched his hips forward. Inside, it was tight, closed, and hot—and it enthralled Hirosue completely. As they kissed, he came inside Matsuoka over and over. He refused to pull out of that comfortable crevice until Matsuoka pleaded with him to do so.

Matsuoka's lips, glistening from their kiss, stirred his desire again.

"Did it hurt?" he asked as he stroked the man's cheek. Matsuoka's gaze flitted down.

"—No."

"You don't have to pretend it didn't, okay? You sound a little hoarse. Do you want a drink of water?"

Matsuoka nodded, so Hirosue climbed out of bed and took a bottle of water out of the refrigerator. When he passed it to Matsuoka, the man held it in both hands and took small gulps like a child. He was dribbling a little bit from the corner of his mouth, so Hirosue pressed his fingertip against it gently. Matsuoka flushed and thrust the bottle back at him.

"You can have it back."

Hirosue went on to touch his ear.

"Why're you touching me?" Matsuoka asked.

"Would you rather not be touched?"

"That's not what I meant, but..."

When Hirosue touched the edge of his eye, Matsuoka screwed his eyes shut, hunched his shoulders, and grew small. The sight of his face was so endearing that Hirosue brushed his lips against both of the man's eyelids.

He took Matsuoka in his arms. He was warm, and his heart was beating rapidly like a bird's. It was still the middle of the night. Hirosue wondered if he could keep cuddling Matsuoka like this until morning, but the man put both hands against his chest and pushed him away. Maybe Matsuoka didn't like being touchy-feely after the act. It was admittedly a little lonely for Hirosue, who didn't want to break the physical contact. But if Matsuoka didn't like it, there was nothing he could do. Nevertheless, he was reluctant to let Matsuoka go, and longingly tugged at a strand of the man's short bangs between his fingers.

Matsuoka shrank away as if to avoid Hirosue's touch, and began dragging himself up. He had an odd expression on his face.

"I want to go home," Matsuoka said woefully. Hirosue sprang up in bed at his voice.

"Wh-Why?" he stammered.

"I don't like this."

"You didn't like doing it with me?" To be honest, Hirosue wasn't very confident about his skills in bed. The sex had been good for him, but in the end he could not tell whether or not it had been the

same for Matsuoka. He knew the man had climaxed along with him a few times, but...

"Did I do it in a way that you didn't like?"

Matsuoka shook his head. "But you're being nice," he said.

"Can't I be nice to you?"

"It scares me when you're nice."

Hirosue did not understand what he was trying to say.

"Everything's going too well," said Matsuoka. "I was positive you wouldn't be able to sleep with me. No matter how much you were in the mood, I figured it was all in your head and it wouldn't work out. That's why I invited you to bed. I thought if we actually slept together, you'd finally learn the hard way that it wouldn't work."

Matsuoka sniffled.

"You told me so many times you couldn't do it with men, but here you were coming inside me, and looking really happy. Even while we were doing it, I was wondering when you'd stop and say, 'I can't do it' or 'This isn't what I expected', and the whole time I was on guard, trying to prepare myself for it, but it never happened. Partway through, I got swept up, too and... even now, I'm all giddy in my head and it feels weird, and... I don't know what I'm talking about anymore. Oh, right, so I thought maybe I could ground myself if I did something I did regularly, so I tried smoking, but..."

Matsuoka stuck his hand in his hair and ruffled it furiously.

"I'm happy, but I don't like this. Everything's so perfect right now, and I'm in a really good place, and I'd rather die than hear you say 'I can't do it' or 'I've had enough' right now. And I'm scared of that. So I'm going home."

Matsuoka tried to get off the bed, and Hirosue lunged to stop him.

"I won't say anything like that."

"I can't be sure about that. I can't trust you, Hirosue."

Matsuoka's harsh statement made Hirosue feel like cold water had been splashed over the romantic afterglow between them.

"I love you, Hirosue. I love you a lot, but I know what you're like. You're insensitive, and you have mood swings, you're indecisive, and you say you hate lies but you lie yourself. You're nice to people you like, but cold to those you don't like. —I asked myself so many times what I loved about someone like you. It would've been so much easier if I picked a girl. There are girls who tell me they like me, too. I kept telling myself, there's no reason to..."

Matsuoka broke off.

"No reason to choose someone like you."

Hirosue's heart felt raw with pain. It was difficult to have his own shortcomings—of which he was well aware—laid out before him. But Matsuoka was absolutely right, and Hirosue could not argue back. And it was probably his own fault that he was making Matsuoka say this—Matsuoka, a man who said he loved him so much.

"After you dumped me in March, I was depressed for weeks. I couldn't eat properly, and I started to smoke more, and at work I started taking it out on my juniors. I was a total jerk. But I thought, if things weren't going to work out anyway, it was better that it ended this way. It was better that I had no idea where you went. I didn't want to go through hell like that again, so I decided I'd go

out with a girl next time. So I changed my phone, I moved out, and just when I thought I was getting over it..."

Matsuoka's uncertainties overflowed one after another.

"I know I'm saying horrible stuff, but I'm not going to apologize." He compressed his lips into a thin line, looking like he was about to burst into tears. He edged away as if in fear.

"You don't have to apologize. And I'm not angry, either. So you don't have to be scared," Hirosue added. "I'll do my best not to make you feel insecure anymore, Matsuoka."

He caught the man's slender body as he shied away, and embraced him.

"I'll make sure you'll never be scared of being treated nicely again."

He ran his hand carefully through the man's hair. For some moments, Matsuoka stayed still in his arms. Then, he hesitantly slid his arms around Hirosue's back. He gave a large sob, and then, pressing his nose against Hirosue's shoulder, Matsuoka burst into tears like a child.

Night turned to day. In the early morning hours, while darkness still lingered about them, Hirosue and Matsuoka left the hotel together. The streets were deserted like a ghost town, and they used it as a convenient excuse to hold hands on the walk to the station. The first bullet train was scheduled to leave just after six o'clock. Hirosue followed Matsuoka to the platform to see him off. There weren't many people here, either. Hirosue took Matsuoka in a tucked-away corner of the vending machines and gave him a furtive kiss. Even though they had been in each other's arms until morning, it wasn't enough. No amount of physical contact was enough for him anymore.

He hadn't wanted to let Matsuoka go home yesterday. He didn't want to let the man go today, either.

"Are you hungry?"

"I usually don't eat breakfast."

"Want something to drink?"

"I'm fine for now. If I get thirsty, I'll buy something on the train."

"Does it hurt to sit down?"

"I'll lie down if the seat beside me is free."

In the end, Matsuoka began to laugh at Hirosue's bombardment of questions.

"You'll go bald from worrying too much."

"But..."

"It's nice of you, but you can keep the worrying in moderation."

The bullet train pulled into the station. Matsuoka was the very last one to board. He had been smiling the whole time they were talking, but the moment the doors closed, a sorrowful look spread over his face. Matsuoka gave a small wave. The bullet train pulled away out of sight.

After the rumble of the train faded, Hirosue was overcome with loneliness. He felt like half of him had been torn away. He yearned to see the man again, even though they had just parted. He seriously considered jumping onto the next train to chase after him.

An incoming e-mail interrupted his thoughts. It was from Matsuoka.

'Are you coming down this weekend?'

That was all it said. It was a question, but Hirosue couldn't help but feel like it was a plea for him to come. Of course, he had full intentions of doing so. Now, with the relationship they were in, the two-hour trip by bullet train and forty minutes by local line seemed an unfathomable distance.

'I'm coming.'

He returned a short message like as if they were in conversation. He waited for a little while, but there was no reply. If he stayed on the bullet train platform any longer, he felt like he would really find himself jumping on the next train. Hirosue walked briskly to the platform for the local line.

It was perhaps ten minutes after he had boarded the train. When he emerged from a tunnel, he heard his cell phone ring as a new e-mail arrived. It was from Matsuoka, and the subject line read, "Don't mind me." That only made Hirosue even more curious, and he rushed to open the e-mail.

'I want to see your face. I want to be treated gently, to be told I'm loved. I'm sorry. I know I'm being weird. But I wanted to say this. I'm sorry. Don't mind me.'

Matsuoka was a man who was never selfish, and never insisted on getting his way—but Hirosue could tell that these were his honest feelings. His chest burned with emotion, he felt choked up, and his breaths shook. If love was going to make him choke up like this all the time, he'd never be able to do anything else.

But at the same time, that fact made him so happy he was almost brought to tears. He was completely hopeless. How many more nights until the weekend? Hirosue counted the days on his fingers like a child before Christmas.¹¹

11 Original Japanese reads "school hike" (which is like a universal metaphor for something kids look forward to). Changed because school hikes in N. America don't carry as strong of a connotation.

Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up *Utsukushii Koto* Volume 2. For those of you who have been waiting since the magazine publication for this to be compiled into a volume, as well as waiting for the second volume to come out, I'm sorry to have kept you. I can finally write "End" with a flourish. Two volumes of roving around in circles, all over romance. It was a long, long journey.

Now that their relationship has sorted its problems out, it's time for Hirosue to thoroughly take his time falling madly in love with Matsuoka. As for Matsuoka, I'd imagine he'd be clumsy at handling such a Hirosue, especially because he, too, loves him back very much. I'd want him to be pelted with Hirosue's love beams and become head-over-heels.

In the delusions inside my head, the two have begun living happily together, and have become the kind of hopelessly sappy couple that people roll their eyes at.

I always think that a man who's gentle but self-demeaning and a little insensitive is a really bad combination. I don't know how many times I muttered, "Ugh, what a jerk..." to myself while thinking of Hirosue's lines. But I do feel like these types of people are common in society.

As I also wrote in the afterword for the first volume, this story is driven by romance and ends with romance. What surprised me while I was revising the scripts published in the magazine was that there was no mention at all of the name of the company these two worked at, nor the specific kind of work they did.

Back then, I suppose the company didn't matter, as long as there was love. Maybe I was the one who'd turned blind to my surroundings because I was too occupied with love. I thought, if I'd come this far, I might as well keep going. So the story drew to a close without the company name ever coming up. Haha.

To Ms. Shoko Hidaka, who handled the illustrations: now I can't wait to line up the two beautiful covers of the first and second volumes. I immensely enjoyed seeing all the different versions of Matsuoka: crossdressed; normal; short hair, glasses, and a goatee.... It really fuelled my wildest imaginations. Thank you so much.

To my editor, who always takes good care of me: finally all of the serialized parts of the story have been novelized. I'm relieved as well that *Utsukushii Koto*, which was the most difficult work for me, is over. I still have plans, so I hope we can continue to work together.

Thank you for reading until the end. I hope to hear from you about any comments you might have.

Hoping to see you again in another book,

Narise Konohara

Written one day in December